

Early in My Evolution: Some Changes, Some Constants, and an Ultimate Goal

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Currently, I am an Associate Professor at James Madison University (JMU) in the Department of Psychology, where I have been since 2004, primarily teaching courses in statistics and industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology. I earned my undergraduate degree in psychology from West Virginia University (WVU) in 1997, and my Master's and PhD degrees in I/O Psychology from Auburn University in 2000 and 2002, respectively. I was fortunate enough to garner a tenure-track position at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX after graduate school, where I was nominated for the Faculty Achievement Award for Excellence in Teaching in my second year. At JMU, I received the Outstanding Junior Faculty Award for the College of Integrated Science & Technology in 2007. Also in 2007, I was honored with the Early Career Award by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology.

### **My Early Development as a Teacher**

At Auburn, I met Bill Buskist, who became my teaching mentor and my dear friend. I did not originally want to pursue teaching as a career until I had the opportunity to work with and know Bill. He has certainly influenced me more than any other person. However, teaching seeds were planted long before I met Bill. Here are but a few of the many lessons that lead me to a career in teaching.

*Use psychology to teach psychology.* It was in Michael Perone's psychology of learning class that I first experienced a teacher applying what he knew from psychology to how he taught the class. He explained the contingencies for attendance and performance, and how he was capitalizing on what we knew about basic principles of learning to help us succeed in class. I think it was his influence that convinced me to use psychology principles in the classroom if you are going to teach psychology (Saville & Zinn, 2009; Zinn, 2009).

*Good research is vital for good application.* Phil Chase, my honors thesis advisor at WVU, showed me that research was vital to the practice of psychology. I remember telling him that I was not interested in research, and that I wanted to *apply* psychology (I have similar conversations with my students very regularly). Phil told me that in order to apply psychology well, a psychologist has to know the research behind the concepts that he or she wants to apply. I began to develop an appreciation for research that has only grown over the years. As a teacher, helping my students understand the importance of the scientific method and of psychology as a science are two of my primary goals.

*You will screw up, and that's ok.* I completely bombed my honors thesis defense at WVU. I was flustered, confused, and could not answer questions well. I was also devastated. However, that was a critical learning moment. Until then, my perception of success was being perfect. After that, I realized that mistakes are inevitable and the more quickly I could learn from them, the more successful I would be. Furthermore, it has led me to be insistent about helping students learn from their mistakes (Zinn, 2009).

*Teaching and research go hand in hand.* Christopher Newland, my research advisor at Auburn, did not supervise any of my teaching and, to this day, I do not believe he has ever seen me teach. Nevertheless, he has been instrumental in shaping my career as a teacher for one specific reason: teaching students about research is teaching. Through his research mentorship, I began to value the collaboration between professors and students on research. Because of his influence, supervising undergraduate research is one of my favorite parts of my job.

*Apply the same evidence-based standards to teaching.* By working with Bill Buskist during graduate school, I learned to appreciate the endeavor of investigating teaching behavior

just like any other behavior. I have continued this pursuit throughout my career, as investigating teaching techniques is the primary function of my research group.

*Talk to others about teaching.* At Auburn, we were very fortunate to have a supportive environment for new teachers. When I started at Auburn, all first year students were assigned three discussion sections of a course called The Individual and Society, a required course for all students in the university. Luckily, we were concurrently enrolled in a teaching course, led by Bill Buskist, where we could ask questions about teaching, share our concerns, and learn from Bill about how to be a good teacher. Having a venue to discuss common problems and get support from others is vital for surviving as a new teacher. After becoming more involved in teaching, I began attending conferences, including the Southeastern Teaching of Psychology conference, where I was able to learn from experts in the field.

Although I did not start graduate school with the idea that I would go into academics, I liked teaching right from the start. I had the opportunity to teach several different classes while at Auburn, including being the instructor of record for an I/O course. However, for over three years, I was pursuing a career in consulting, even though I was not enjoying my consulting experiences as much as my teaching experiences. After a discussion with Bill at an Arby's across from campus, it finally occurred to me that I could pursue academics as a career. I changed my focus and got more involved in research, including joining the EDGE (Excellence in the Direction and Guidance of Education) group with Bill. This team was an assembly of graduate and undergraduate students interested in answering empirical questions about teaching. I have never regretted my decision to pursue academics or felt like I missed out on a different career. It has always seemed like the right path.

### **Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher**

Hopefully, I model lifelong learning to my students. With every semester I realize how much I have to learn as a teacher. Also, with every semester the concept of what a good teacher does becomes more amorphous and less obvious, the opposite of what I expected when I started teaching.

*Can a teacher be too helpful?* One of the primary obstacles that I have worked on overcoming in my teaching is the balance between being available to students and enabling counterproductive behavior. I think that people who love teaching sincerely want to help students succeed and tend to make themselves available to students as much as possible. Those who love teaching want to provide guidance to students. It has only been recently that I have thought perhaps I should not be as available to my students and should provide less guidance.

This idea seems counter to so much of how I identify as a teacher and what educators generally think of as a good teacher. In fact, several master teacher behaviors focus on the accessibility and helpfulness of the professor (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002). However, it became very clear to me one day when I was sitting on the couch at home. My son, who was probably around a year old at that time, was trying to climb onto the couch to join me, but was struggling. As I went to help him, I thought that he needed to learn to do it on his own. I began to think that perhaps by providing my students with too much guidance, I have been inhibiting their abilities to learn how to learn on their own. I regularly struggle with balancing when to step in to help my students and when I should let them work harder to figure things out on their own.

*Should a teacher always be positive?* On a related note, I have recently been wrestling with the idea that being positive is not always good and that we may be doing students a disservice by not addressing real weaknesses and difficulties. In particular, should I tell students

that they can be and do anything? Or should I help them discover their strengths and weaknesses in order to be more realistic? I have spoken several times about the importance of helping students embrace struggle and failure (Zinn, 2008; Zinn, 2009). Certain cultural pressures have emphasized the importance of self-esteem, often leading to non-contingent and meaningless praise (Twenge, 2006). These cultural pressures may have resulted in college students not being able to handle failure or struggle. Research is now showing the importance of desirable difficulties in learning, emphasizing that it is not only OK for students to make mistakes, but important for them to do so (Bjork & Linn, 2006).

*How should a good teacher handle entitlement in the classroom?* Another obstacle that I have written and spoken about recently involves the oft-cited student entitlement problem and the idea that students are our customers (Zinn, 2007). Until recently, there has not been much research on either concept, although many faculty have lamented both entitlement and the customer perspective for some time. The primary obstacle here is explaining to students what my role as a teacher encompasses, and what it does not. Students have a very different conceptualization of learning than many faculty do; students often see teachers as dispensing necessary information, whereas faculty view teaching as helping students learn how to learn on their own. If we are dealing with students who feel entitled to certain outcomes and/or believe that they deserve to dictate the structure of the classroom because they are customers, we will certainly run into conflict. My challenge has been how to push students and simultaneously convince them that they want to be pushed, something that is quite difficult to do. I have often said that my role is like that of a personal trainer and it is my job to kick their academic butts (Clay, 2009).

*Do teachers have to choose between teaching and research?* In an academic's life, there are typically three worlds: teaching, research, and service. Many people find it difficult to balance the three, feeling like they have to sacrifice in one area in order to do the others well. It is true that this balance is difficult for anyone to attain. Luckily, I have an easier time than most teachers with this balance. For me, an I/O psychologist specializing in teaching and training, my teaching goals directly correspond with my research goals. I conduct research on effective teaching and training techniques, and I apply those methods in my classes. I also focus a great deal of my attention on my student research group, which necessarily merges teaching and training. Furthermore, much of my service, at both the university and national levels, is related to teaching and improving the learning environment. Thus, my three worlds are like three overlapping Venn diagrams, each one influencing the other and all three difficult to separate.

Ultimately, when you are in a position to work with students on research, there really is no separation between teaching and research. Teaching students about psychology involves teaching them about research, and conducting research with students is teaching. Ultimately, it is one of the most rewarding aspects of my job.

### **The Examined Life of a Teacher**

While reflecting on my short time as a teacher, I have discovered a couple of things. First, I do have a core set of goals for students. Second, I have changed as a teacher in some significant ways.

*My ultimate goals as a teacher.* I asked students, some past and some present, to tell me what they thought my main goals were as a teacher. Students identified that my goals are to teach students:

1. To love learning.

2. That the *science* of psychology is related to life outside of this classroom.
3. That in order to succeed, they should work hard and that hard work is good for them.
4. That hard work doesn't entitle you to the outcomes you want.
5. How to handle mistakes.
6. How to learn and think for themselves. This was probably the most cited goal from my students, and it is truly one of my underlying goals for all of them.

I love learning. I think that characteristic is the most important one that I can bring to my interactions with students. Over the years, I have tried to hone my teaching philosophy, being careful to identify the techniques of the best teachers. However, after thinking about the most important principles at the heart of my teaching, I think it is simply that I love to learn and I want my students to love learning as much as I do.

*Ever evolving.* I still love teaching. I cannot imagine another life or another career. That being the case, I believe it is interesting the ways in which my approach to teaching has changed. First, I am not afraid of screwing up. I think that in my first couple of years as a teacher, I was very afraid of making mistakes. Now, I take things more in stride. I understand that this career is (hopefully) a long one and by making mistakes I can learn in ways that I could not otherwise.

I am now more focused on the big picture. I am less concerned about covering every piece of information in my courses. I focus more on using examples of content to teach students how to learn about that particular topic on their own. After all, there will always be more content to learn. My job is to help them learn how to learn without me.

I am more realistic with students. As I mentioned above, one of the difficulties that I have as a teacher is balancing between being positive and being realistic. When I first started teaching, I believed it was my job to encourage students to become whatever they wanted to become.

However, now I believe it is my job to help students find their strengths. I no longer believe that it is a bad thing for students to recognize their weaknesses or to come to the conclusion that they might not be well-suited for a specific career.

*Rewards and frustrations.* Often, when teachers are asked about the rewards of this career, they say it is making a difference in students' lives. That statement is true for me, as well. It is always rewarding to hear from those few students whose lives were changed in some way due to my teaching. It is very powerful and humbling to know that I can have that kind of impact on students and their futures. However, the real rewards for me are less momentous, yet just as important. The real rewards are a student asking a good question in class, a student telling me they understand a concept based on what I said, or just simply interacting with students about the material. I find it rewarding to be on a college campus, something I am reminded of each fall when new students arrive. For them, all of this is new. There is an anticipation and excitement about the college environment. It keeps me from becoming jaded because, every year, I have the chance to do everything better and to make a fresh start. Most people do not have that opportunity.

And I love the job. I get to teach about what I want. I get to learn about whatever I want. I get to conduct research on whatever I want. There is always so much to learn and so many new avenues to explore, it is easy for me to maintain enthusiasm for the learning process. Enthusiasm and excitement are not just for the students; they are for me as well. I am able to do my job better because I can maintain a level of enthusiasm that is not phony or manufactured. It really is true that I am excited about what I am teaching and what I am learning.

However, therein lay the frustrations as well. Many of my frustrations are rooted in my interest in so many different aspects of psychology. It is so easy to be pulled in too many

directions. It is difficult to tell a student that they cannot do research in a particular area because it does not fit in well with your research program. Every semester, I am trying to learn about a different topic so that I can effectively supervise undergraduate research projects. That is difficult to do, and extremely difficult to do well. It is a worry and frustration that I have every term.

I believe my enthusiasm cuts both ways as well. Students cite it as one of my strengths, but it also causes me a great deal of frustration. When you are someone who loves learning, who loves psychology, and who loves wrestling with new problems and ideas, combating apathy in the classroom can become daunting. Why don't they love this as much as I do? Why don't they value education as much as I do? Why aren't they living up to their potential? These thoughts often cross my mind, usually near the end of the semester. I have to remind myself that I was not always a good student. I am sure I did many things as a student that now drive me crazy as a teacher. I remember that my job is to be a good model for learning and self-improvement and, hopefully, my students will embrace those characteristics as I did.

*The goal of evidence-based teaching.* There are some semesters when I am simply trying to survive, barely staying ahead of my students. There are times when I forget to do mid-semester evaluations, or do not follow up on the feedback I collected. I am sure I do not evaluate and reflect on my teaching as much as I should.

However, I do try to approach my teaching as a scholarly endeavor. I teach my students that if you are going to make a decision, you need to have good evidence on which to base that decision. I try to follow the same rule with my teaching. Each semester, I collect data in my classroom to evaluate how the different methods I am using are working. Several years ago, Bryan Saville and I began collecting data on a teaching method called interteaching (Boyce &

Hineline, 2002). Since then, we have published several articles on the method and how it works in the classroom (Saville, Zinn, & Elliott, 2005; Saville, Zinn, Neef, Ferreri, & Van Norman, 2006; Saville & Zinn, in press). Based on the results of those and other studies, I craft the next class. In this way, I am building a body of knowledge about how different techniques work in the classroom and, hopefully, my future students benefit from that knowledge.

I have always been interested in collecting data on teaching. I have never thought of the behavior of teaching as different from any other behavior. As an I/O psychologist who has focused on effective workplace training, the classroom is no different to me. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to assess my teaching each semester. However, I have had to become more deliberate about the changes that I make in the classroom. I tend to be very enthusiastic about making changes to my classes. I used to redesign my classes nearly every semester based on something I read or a new idea that I had. That approach tends to be exhausting and, ultimately, unproductive. Now, I try to take a systematic approach to the changes I implement in my classes. Instead of entirely revamping a course, I will modify one aspect of that course and compare it to the previous semester. In this way, I can more clearly see what aspects of my teaching work and which do not. By treating my courses like a lab, I have designed better studies and, therefore, can make better decisions based on those data.

### **Advice for New Teachers**

If you want to teach, first ask yourself this question, “Do you like students?” I have seen so many college professors who seem to have a pure disdain for college students. If you do not like students, do not be a teacher! Being able to develop rapport with your students is one of the primary factors of being a good teacher (Buskist & Saville, 2004). If you do not truly like and

care for students, you will not be able to develop rapport. Students will forgive a multitude of mistakes if they believe you have their best interests at heart.

Next, be ready to make mistakes and learn from them. In fact, get ready to have bad days teaching (Zinn, Reis-Bergen, & Baker, 2009). Investigate new ways of teaching and interacting with students. Get creative with assignments. Learn about different teaching techniques. Watch other people teach. Read your colleagues' syllabi. Observe a teacher in another department. Try new things and be prepared for some of them to flop. As I mentioned above, one of the things I want my students to learn is that mistakes are good. Failures are helpful.

Try not to worry about whether or not your students like you. In the short term, there are going to be students who do not like you or think you are too difficult. If you are genuinely interested in their learning and well-being, then most students will, at least eventually, understand the value of what you are doing.

Keep what works. It is wonderful to be able to learn from other teachers and experts in the field, but do not try to mimic them. There are a few characteristics about my teaching that I have maintained since I started. I am goofy. I'm very enthusiastic. I'm pretty laid back in the classroom. I have a low threshold for cheating. I don't sugarcoat a lot of things. And, as one of my current students said, I am able to be "critical and opinionated without coming off as a b\*\*\*\*." I have learned to embrace those characteristics, because I think they make me a better teacher.

### **Final Thoughts**

I am so lucky to have the job that I do. To be sure, there are times when I am frustrated with my students or frustrated with the politics of working for an institution of higher education. When I am grading papers at the end of the semester, I do not love every minute of it. I worry

that we do not value education in our culture the way we should. I fear that we are moving from educating to giving out technical degrees. But, those moments are but a few in a career that has wonderful opportunity, flexibility, and freedom, a career that has real meaning and impact. I hope to continue to evolve as a teacher for many years to come.

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