

The Shifting Currents of Scholarship and Teaching in the Ecologies of Academic Careers

Neil Lutsky, Carleton College

How a graduate student navigates the shifting currents of scholarship and teaching represents a significant difficulty of advanced study in psychology. It is hard enough as a graduate student to explore, refine, pursue, and promote a set of research interests, even if it normally represents the primary reason for being in graduate school. It may be even more challenging to be interested in teaching, because teaching is less frequently recognized as a professional aspiration by graduate faculty (although, laudably, this trend is changing). It may be most burdensome of all—although not uncommon—to be unsure about one’s academic motivations and how scholarship or teaching might come together to constitute a personally viable academic role. Nonetheless, the resolve, optimism, ingenuity, and adaptability that navigating the confusions and alienations of graduate school may serve an academic well throughout a career, especially when charting a course for scholarly and teaching activities.

In some hypothetical academic place, scholarship and teaching are both highly valued, supported, and rewarded. Fortunately, time in that mythical place expands endlessly to accommodate the preparation and execution of scholarship and pedagogy. Multiple roles also facilitate each other such that an investment in teaching almost always strengthens research, and research accomplishments enrich and sustain teaching. Finally, in this place, life outside academia is not only possible but even desirable; all family, community, and personal activities contribute to teaching effectiveness and to research productivity and to renown, and all professional work strengthens personal life.

Of course, the world of academia, taken as a whole, doesn’t operate this way. We are forced to make choices, set balances, cut corners, and accommodate pressing necessities, and

then weave the compromised elements of academic life that remain into compelling narratives of purpose, coherence, and growth. Such professional and personal acrobatics are a fundamental fact of contemporary academic life. Nonetheless, we can thrive and enjoy deeply engaging and fulfilling roles in academia. How might it be possible to incorporate both scholarship and teaching in an academic life in psychology? This essay addresses that question.

Where You Are Going?: The Ecologies of Academic Careers

A First Big Point

It is vital and, at times, reassuring to recognize that the real world of academia in psychology is far messier—more open, variable, and changing—than the immediate experience of graduate school might indicate. Graduate socialization may promote the prototype of life as a primary researcher, but PhD psychologists list “teaching” and “research and development” with equal frequency when asked to indicate their primary professional activity (Bailey, 2004). This tendency shows, in a gross way, that PhD psychologists forge highly varying balances between scholarship and teaching in their professional lives.

A Second Big Point and a Corollary

Somehow, academic roles accommodate this diversity in balances between scholarship and teaching, which suggests a second big point: there is no one place. Academic environments vary considerably in terms of the balance of scholarship and teaching they expect, support, and reward. What is balanced—what constitutes fine scholarship and fine teaching—also varies across academic ecologies (e.g., Freeman, 2002; Halpern et al., 1998). Graduate students need to recognize these sources of variability, explore ranges of personal aspiration within that variability, and begin to understand the norms of academic environments that might accommodate particular balances of scholarship and teaching.

At the same time, it is important to avoid stereotyping academic environments, which leads to this corollary of the second point: there is no one place at the place you happen to be. Any one academic environment often accommodates a variety of balances of scholarship and

teaching even given that institution's central tendencies. Undergraduate liberal arts colleges known for teaching often value and nurture faculty whose primary commitment is to scholarship; major research universities often value and nurture faculty whose primary commitment is to teaching. Faculty begin academic careers intent on sustaining particular balances of scholarship and teaching, but those balances shift, sometimes radically, as a function of development, new institutional and disciplinary histories, changes in higher education, and happenstance. The norms of institutional academic ecologies are real, to be sure, but genuine variability can be found in most.

A Third and Reorienting Point

Are “scholarship” and “teaching” two monolithic, independent academic callings that have to be balanced, as suggested above? Without doubt, given the requirements of certain scholarly and teaching activities, there are times when temporary or long-term trade-offs between the two are necessary. However, it is also possible, and at times essential, to intertwine scholarship and teaching. In other words, scholarship is often teaching, and teaching is often scholarship.

Both graduate and undergraduate faculty “teach by means of research activities” (Clark, 1997). Teaching through research is highly characteristic of graduate education and is an increasingly common hallmark of outstanding undergraduate curricula in psychology (e.g., Newman, 1998). In addition, scholarship is not limited to the creation of new knowledge in a standard discipline. New perspectives on scholarship (Boyer, 1990), in conjunction with calls for the evaluation of educational practices, have put a premium on applications of scholarly expertise in teaching (Johnson, 2002). Contemporary teaching is expected to be informed by pedagogical scholarship (e.g., Halpern & Hakel, 2003; National Research Council, 2000), to demonstrate scholarly integrations and applications of knowledge (Halpern et al., 1998), and to be evaluated in a systematic manner (e.g., Dunn, Mehrotra, & Halonen, 2004).

Teaching itself, at its best, is centered on immersing students in the values of discovery. If “the fundamental goal of education in psychology...is to teach students to think

as scientists about behavior” (Brewer, 1993, p. 169), then it follows that the teaching of psychology is not primarily about conveying conceptual names and definitions or lists and descriptions of noteworthy studies. It is about training students in the manner of thinking characteristic of psychological science.

In sum, scholarship and teaching can represent overlapping and intertwined domains. A key dimension of variability in ecologically selective pressures for scholarship and teaching is precisely how tightly interrelated an institution may view these two domains. The existence of this variability, in turn, suggests that one goal of a graduate experience should be to explore and to test possible fits to environments that are differentially conducive to traditional scholarship and teaching.

How You Might Get to Where You are Going in Academia

Given the diversity and ongoing evolution of academic environments for scholarship and teaching, how can a graduate student develop the plumage to be attractive to an appropriate ecological mate (i.e., a desired academic position in psychology)? The obvious but not always feasible answer to this question is to develop and demonstrate as a graduate student interests and accomplishments that will match those valued in a range of desired environments. Many of the essays in this volume articulate what accomplishments particular educational environments value and how those might be achieved in graduate study.

For many students, however, the ecological pressures of graduate school—specifically those pushing research productivity over teaching—make broad investments difficult. Nonetheless, it is still possible in a domain of specialization to recognize and demonstrate values, characteristics, and interests that potentially generalize to and predict success in other environments. Evidence of curiosity, openness, adaptability, creativity, rigor, an eagerness to test ideas, and scholarly grounding come to mind in this regard. Although it is attractive to have demonstrated expertise and success in both scholarly and pedagogical domains, what may be more practical is to show appreciations and abilities that potentially transcend a domain and to recognize the import of doing so. As the currents of scholarship and teaching

continue to shift in the years ahead, such dexterity will, I believe, serve academic psychologists exceptionally well.

References

- Bailey, D. S. (2004, February). Number of psychology PhDs declining. *Monitor on Psychology, 35*, 18-19.
- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professorate*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Brewer, C. L. (1993). Curriculum. In T. V. McGovern (Ed.), *Handbook for enhancing undergraduate education in psychology* (pp. 161-182). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Clark, B. R. (1997). The modern integration of research activities with teaching and learning. *Journal of Higher Education, 68*, 241-255.
- Dunn, D. S., Mehrotra, C. M., & Halonen, J. S. (2004). *Measuring up: Educational assessment challenges and practices for psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Freeman, J. E. (2002). Differences in teaching in a liberal arts college versus research university. In S. F. Davis & W. Buskist (Eds.), *The teaching of psychology: Essays in honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer* (pp. 247-257). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Halpern, D. F., Smothergill, D. W., Allen, M., Baker, S., Baum, C., Best, D., et al. (1998). Scholarship in psychology: A paradigm for the twenty-first century. *American Psychologist, 53*, 1292-1297.
- Halpern, D. F., & Hakel, M. D. (2003). Applying the science of learning to the university and beyond. *Change, 35*, 36-41.
- Johnson, D. E. (2002). Teaching, research, and scholarship. In S. F. Davis & W. Buskist (Eds.), *The teaching of psychology: Essays in honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer* (pp. 153-162). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

National Research Council (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Newman, J. H. (1998). Rapprochement among undergraduate psychology, science, mathematics, engineering, and technology education. *American Psychologist*, 53, 1032-1043.