

Getting in on the Ground Floor: Introducing Psychology in High School

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My journey in the field of education began as a dream of a young girl who loved to learn. Childhood games followed the theme of teaching and learning, school was fun, and I always wanted to be the teacher. I am currently pursuing my dream, as a teacher in a large suburban high school. I am the Department Chair of the Social Studies Department of L. V. Berkner High School, Richardson, Texas that serves a student population of near 3000. I teach the Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology course that affords high school students the opportunity to sit for an AP Exam and attempt receipt of college credit. In addition to these duties, I also teach Introductory Psychology and Economics. I have chosen this level of education because I feel that I can have a positive impact on students as they begin to make decisions about the direction of their lives. After teaching bright-eyed 7th grade students the glory of geography for several years, I moved to teaching high school seniors so I could guide them to success in postsecondary education and motivate them to contribute to their communities.

I am a secondary educator by training. I came to teach high school and AP Psychology by assignment and discovered that there was much to be updated. The field had changed dramatically in the years between my graduation and beginning teaching. I began to seek opportunities to enhance my teaching of psychology. I attended several intensive training sessions for the new AP Psychology course, and I became affiliated with the American Psychological Association (APA). I joined Teachers of Psychology in Secondary School (TOPSS) and was elected to the Board where I served as chair (1996-1997). I was subsequently appointed to its Board of Educational Affairs as a high school representative. I also served on the planning committee for APA's Psychology Partnership Project (P3), which brought together nationally recognized educators for a planning conference to determine ways to bring the field of psychology to the general public. My committee developed a variety of plans to bring active learning of the science of psychology to students of all ages.

I also have worked with The College Board as an Advanced Placement (AP) test development committee member, reader, and table leader for AP Exams. I guide workshops for AP Psychology educators in The College Board's Southwest Region. I was the AP Psychology representative for the Texas Education Agency committee that developed a manual for the best practices teaching of Pre-AP and AP courses to prepare students for the rigors of greater academic challenges.

I have been honored by being named a Richardson Independent School District RISE Teacher of the Year (1998), the APA Society for the Teaching of Psychology's Moffett Award for High School Teaching Excellence (1999) and the College Board's Southwest Region Special Recognition Award for Advanced Placement Education (2005). Although each of these honors has been a pleasure to receive, the real reward for teaching comes from my students who say, "Hey, I liked this course!"

My Early Development as a Teacher

My professional goal has always been to be a high school educator. I meet students at a crucial point in their educational journey from the discovery of learning to a view of what they can ultimately accomplish in their lives. Students in my classes are usually studying psychology for the first time. Although postsecondary educators will guide students in a specific direction, I can say I have helped students take the first step along that path. Many students feel they have a rudimentary understanding of psychology when they enter my classes (which is usually gained from popular media); I introduce them to the science of psychology. I have the responsibility to develop my skills as an Introductory Psychology instructor to give my students the best learning experience possible.

Unlike many psychology educators, my formal educational training is in curriculum and instruction. I specialized in the social sciences, including history, economics, government, geography, and psychology, all of which I have taught. My college course of study taught me specifically how to reach and teach the budding minds of adolescents. Only after a number of years teaching other disciplines did I rediscover my interest in teaching high school psychology. With limited support from my academic institution, I retrained myself to teach the rapidly changing field of psychology. I was assigned to teach the AP Psychology soon after The College Board established it.

I was determined to hone my skills with specific attention to teaching young people on the pre-college level. I applied to be a participant in a National Science Foundation funded summer institute designed to prepare the high school educator for the teaching of AP Psychology. The institute was led by Dr. Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr. at Texas A & M University, College Station. I was accepted as a participant and returned for subsequent summers to act as a teacher-facilitator. This intensive study provided a strong content base and the opportunity to develop hands-on, active learning demonstrations to bring the science of psychology to students. Subsequently, I was named as a facilitator for the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation funded summer institute led by Dr. Ken Keith at Nebraska Wesleyan University (now at the University of San Diego), which also offered teachers an intensive educational experience. Additionally, I was asked by several AP summer institute directors to develop week-long

training for teachers new to AP Psychology as well as for those seasoned professionals who wish to update their knowledge base and be introduced to new teaching techniques. I also have developed a number of one-day and two-day seminars for The College Board in the southwest region. Preparing these educational seminars has made me a better teacher for my students and hopefully has led others to the joy of teaching the science of psychology. Each of these experiences has given me room to grow as an effective instructor.

It had been through these varied learning opportunities that I have met some of the finest scholars of the field of psychology. It was during my first AP Psychology learning experience that I met the professor that I would consider as my professional mentor. Perhaps he is unaware of the influence he has had on my teaching career and subsequently on my colleagues and students. I am but one of many students, teachers, and colleagues that Dr. Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr. has powerfully influenced. Dr. Benjamin affects my work daily as I aspire to have a long-term impact on students just beginning their study of psychology. He works tirelessly for the advancement of students of psychology from AP students through those pursuing doctoral degrees.

There are many other colleagues from whom I have learned successful teaching techniques. Of particular note are exemplary educators such as Dr. Charles Brewer (Furman University) who has shown me the fascinating history of the evolution of learning; Randy Ernst (Lincoln, Nebraska), and Charlie Blair-Broeker (Cedar Falls, Iowa) who inspired me to demonstrate active learning to every student in class; Nancy Grippo (Palo Alto, California) who showed me how to teach reading and writing to students with varied backgrounds; and Nancy Grayson (Waco, Texas) who showed me an example of using knowledge to extend learning opportunities to students of all ages.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

I was formally trained as an educator and not a psychologist. With my undergraduate background, I focus a portion of each of my psychology courses on how students can become effective learners. The teaching of skills to collect and acquire knowledge, to process and analyze information, and to develop critical thinking is essential part to my instruction. My teaching of Social Studies courses often adds an interesting element to my teaching of psychology. I have the opportunity to mold and shape young minds, dispel false notions regarding psychology, and introduce students to what I believe is the science that will bring the greatest benefit to the world in the future. I believe that the psychologist of tomorrow will solve the issues of people living together in a shrinking world. I have the opportunity to show the most creative, intelligent, and motivated students at my high school the value of psychology, and to attract them to psychology as a potential profession. I hope that as their

first introduction to psychology, I have had some small part in getting students excited about their future studies here on the “ground floor” of teaching of psychology in high school.

Times have certainly changed in my career of teaching. Is it me or have my students changed? I teach in a very large suburban, middle-class area of Richardson, Texas. In times past, students have entered the classroom as naive learners with relatively few demands on their time, limited life experiences, and the entire world open to them. Currently my students have a much greater academic experience, having taken many other challenging courses and perhaps several other AP courses. They have many demands on their time, many working as many as 20 to 30 hours per week in addition to full-time school work, participating in extra curricular activities, and doing community service. My students have situations in their lives that far exceed what adolescents should have to deal with on a daily basis; these issues represent obstacles for attaining many of their desired educational and career goals. Even with these pressing issues, my ultimate goal is to support all of my students as they grow and expand their educational life.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

A principle to guide daily classroom instruction, a motto for those involved in the learning process and a personal philosophy for teaching, is “motivation is of greater importance to future success than current level of skills.” Past academic experience, obstacles to current performance, and excessive demands on time are of little importance. Motivation, the driving force of all behavior, the directing of goal-oriented actions, and the energizing of accomplishments, is of greatest concern. If I am motivated to guide student learning, and if students are motivated to gain from our collective experience, then we are ready to rise above any challenge. We, as a class, are ready to teach and learn from each other. If we are directed toward a common goal, we are on our way to a winning experience. My daily work is guided by the philosophy that all students are capable of success.

In my 25 years in the classroom, trends have come and gone. New ideas and theories have been introduced as the ultimate way to teach. Early in my career, I felt it was my responsibility to present each morsel of knowledge to students. As the years and trends have passed, I have decided the following basic approaches to teaching. First, allow students the joy of discovery in learning; they need not have all content materials formally presented. Second, allow students to take personal responsibility for their own learning; they need to take ownership of their progress. Finally, allow students to take part in active learning through a variety of techniques. At my teaching level, it is important to be a guide for student learning. With changing ideas about the best way to teach, I have come to rely on these basic tenets.

It is quite amazing to be in the high school classroom. Students enter with only a vague notion of expectations, and they question whether their abilities will help them achieve success. Students often do not think that they can achieve on the college level while they are still in high school. I push and pull to show students what they can do. I have high expectations and express them to the young people in my classes. The reward for my students' and my efforts comes as they sit for the AP Exam. When my students complete this strenuous exam and feel that they have grown academically from the experience, we are together successful. An additional reward emerges when my students return after their first or second year of college and tell me that their AP Psychology experience truly prepared them for post-secondary learning. One former student told me that my AP Psychology was a "really hard course," but it gave her the confidence to be a successful psychology major. Such comments help me continue what I do from year to year. I strive to modify my course to keep up with the requirements set forth by the College Board and the updated research in psychology. My personal educational goals are to continue to learn so I can provide my students a rewarding experience. My personal satisfaction comes from student success.

Advice to New Teachers

One bit of sound advice to aspiring teachers is to be brave. I also suggest individuals who wish to become outstanding educators love learning, never be satisfied with their current level of knowledge, and continue to expand their personal life experiences. Excellent educators should surround themselves with like-minded professionals who are also life-long learners. Superior teachers collaborate with other superior teachers to enhance teaching on all levels. Inspired educators work diligently to transfer the excitement of learning to students each and every day.

Early advice to teachers came from William James, Harvard professor, psychologist, philosopher, and master teacher who saw it as his duty "to devote some of his best efforts to the improvement of teaching and the education of teachers." (1899/1958, p.12). James concluded his *Talks To Teachers*, by saying:

I have now ended these talks. If to some of you the things I have said seem obvious or trivial, it is possible that they may appear less so when, in the course of a year or two, you find yourselves noticing and apperceiving events in the schoolroom a little differently, in consequence of some of the conceptions I have tried to make more clear. I cannot but think that to apperceive your pupil as a little sensitive, impulsive, associative, and reactive organism, partly fated and partly free, will lead to a better intelligence of all his ways. Understand him, then, as such a subtle little piece of machinery. And if, in addition, you can also see him *sub specie boni* and love him as well, you will be in the best possible position for becoming perfect teachers.

No better advice can be given.

Reference

James, W. (1899/1958). *Talks to teachers on psychology and to students on some of life's ideals*. New York: W. W. Norton.

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