

The Teaching of Psychology: Enrichment and Bewitchment

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I am currently a full time high school teacher at Perth Amboy High School in Perth Amboy, NJ and an adjunct Professor at Middlesex County College in Edison, NJ. I teach Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology and high school psychology, and depending on the year, I teach anthropology, US history and mathematics. As a college adjunct, I have taught introductory, abnormal, social, educational, and child psychology. My favorite college course to teach is child psychology. I have been a co-presenter at teaching of psychology summer workshops at numerous universities and had the incredible opportunity to be a researcher and teacher in the Yale Summer Psychology Program that was held at Yale University in 1993.

These experiences have made me a better teacher and person, and I was fortunate to interact and watch numerous superb teachers in action. Individuals such as Robert Sternberg, Mahzarin Banaji, Rick Kasschau, Ludy Benjamin, Charles Brewer, Jack Nation, Bruce Henderson, Barney Beins, Perilou Goddard, Diane Halpern, Jane Halonen, Randy Ernst, Charlie Blair-Broeker, Rob McEntarffer, Kristin Whitlock, Mary Jean Voigt, and Marty Anderson.

I have been an AP Psychology reader since the test's inception in 1992 and have been a member of the AP Psychology Test development committee. In 1994, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology bestowed upon me the Moffett Teaching Excellence Award for high school psychology. In 2002-2003, I was named Perth Amboy's School District Teacher of the Year, and in 2003, was given one of four annual Distinguished Secondary Teaching Awards from Princeton University.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I enrolled in teacher preparation courses in graduate school, but felt they were not very helpful. I never had a formal teaching mentor, but I did have an amazing high school teacher in my senior year who greatly affected my life, especially my decision to become a teacher, and who fostered the development of some of my beliefs about teaching. He taught the high school sociology class, and the students sat in a large U shaped arrangement with the teacher at the front of the U.

One time upon arriving in the class, I noticed that the teacher had written about 150 names on the blackboard. The names I recognized were famous individuals throughout history in many different fields (e.g., philosophers, psychologists, writers, poets, historians, scientists, artists, musicians, etc.). The teacher looked at the class with a warm smile, and then

repeatedly alternated between glancing at the board and looking at the class while maintaining that same smile as if he knew some secret we could not comprehend. After about 30 seconds, he finally looked intently at the bewildered students and said, “This is it!” He then erased the names on the board and began the lesson of the day that was unrelated to anything that just happened. I remember going home and asking myself what was the point of this demonstration? It suddenly dawned on me that he was saying do not miss out what the best minds in history have thought or accomplished. Do not limit yourself to your culture, space, and time.

This experience prompted me to become an avid reader and explorer of knowledge. I always make sure that my students in all the classes I teach are aware of well-known scholars in that field. I discuss the work of current historians, mathematicians, anthropologists, or psychologists when I teach those courses. I want to be sure that the students realize that knowledge is always expanding and based on current research and investigations. I stress to my students, that they, too, might have the opportunity to be creators of knowledge.

I believe that over the years I have become a better teacher by observing effective teachers and by extensive reading in a variety of areas. I firmly believe that the single most essential characteristic for teachers is to be very knowledgeable in their respective subject areas. I am not saying it is the only important trait, but the most essential one. Knowing how to teach a subject derives more from knowing the material than any other single factor.

I read extensively in psychology, history, philosophy, and mathematics, and try to read a few trade and professional psychology and science magazines each month. I often discuss this information with my students to let them know how exciting it is to be aware of how the world is changing. A student once said to me that she eventually wanted to become a “reality cracker.” When I asked her to explain, she replied that she wanted to have intensely meaningful perceptions about the world.

I decided to become a high school and college teacher because I enjoy the challenge of changing students’ lives. I want them to think about the world differently and in a more humane manner than they might otherwise. I enjoy teaching psychology in high school because it is so exciting to teach at this level. Where else can one imitate a schizophrenic, a split-brain patient, a preoperational child, a Freudian therapist, a dog suffering from learned helplessness, or a rat in a Skinner Box? Teaching psychology gives me an opportunity to lead in-depth topics that are intrinsically fascinating, relevant to students’ lives, and have important personal and social consequences.

I also very much enjoy teaching child psychology at the college level because I feel that my extensive reading and passion for psychology can influence these students, nearly all of whom want to be elementary school teachers, which in turn will influence their students for

years to come. Some of my goals are to have the students realize the benefits of using positive reinforcement over aversive conditioning, the empirical validity of phonics over whole word approaches, and a greater understanding of the cognitive, emotional, and social worlds of the children for whom they will be caring.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

I face many obstacles in my teaching. The high school in which I work in is an urban school. Many of the students face stressors that are not present in the suburban school world. Most of the students work to assist their families with the essential basics of existence, and many students actually live on their own—they have single rooms and pay for all of their expenses. There are dozens of students who live in charity shelters and have no stable caring adults in their lives. Many students, and even some staff members, have little regard for academic excellence. Forces in the school actively oppose challenging students to take advanced courses. Every day, the school has numerous disruptive announcements. Many students cut classes and many others are disruptive.

I struggle every year to encourage as many students as possible to take AP psychology in my school. I have to hold a few “voluntarily mandatory” psychology sessions at night to review for the AP test. I struggle daily in dealing with many of my students’ emotional problems that interfere with their ability to stay focused in class. Over 85% of my students are bilingual; English is not their first language. This circumstance is even more challenging because I assist them in reading a difficult college textbook. Virtually all of my students come from families in which no parent or guardian is a college graduate; these students have been deprived of childhood experiences that middle class individuals take for granted. For example, I have had many seniors tell me that they have never gone to a museum, on vacation, to a nice restaurant, or to a bookstore other than at the local mall.

I try to be as humorous and engaging as possible with all my classes while demonstrating my genuine love for psychology. I tell my students about important research studies and scientists who changed and developed the field of psychology and also about current scholars who are actively doing so now. One of my most important underlying daily goals is to make my students more humane by emphasizing the application of psychological knowledge as an aid in understanding themselves and others. For example, nearly all of my students have been raised in authoritarian parenting style families, so I impress upon them the advantages of an authoritative parenting style. I continue to struggle with students who have profoundly low socioeconomic backgrounds with very little intellectual stimulation at home.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

My philosophy of teaching, as Charles Brewer so wonderfully puts it, is to “kick some academic butt!” I continuously challenge students to read and think on a higher level. For example, after presenting the standard definition of learning, I ask the students if Piaget would define learning in that way. How about Vygotsky? I start each new chapter with some kind of cognitively-stimulating puzzle or story. For example, how can psychologists discover the kinds of things that infants might be able to perceive? Can an organism habituate to an unconditioned stimulus? What are other ways to assess intelligence besides the standard intelligence tests? My philosophy of teaching is to use guided constructivism. Such questions lead to invigorating and interesting class discussions.

The most important aspect of teaching for me is to connect with my students by relating to them and then actively engaging them in a journey of discovery—sometimes leading them and sometimes allowing them to discover connections of meaning on their own. I realize that communication skills and enthusiasm are necessary, but again, for me, by far the most important trait for a teacher is knowledge of the material.

My teaching has changed over the years mainly by questioning students more often than I used to and by using a greater variety of challenging activities. I use demonstrations before explaining what they represent, but after the students have learned enough to figure it out. I often use video clips to highlight certain content areas. Additionally, I use creative and practical questions and activities along with standard analytic type questions. Sternberg’s research on teaching and intelligence is influential in my teaching as is the work of William Perry, Diane Halpern, and Peter Gray.

The most rewarding aspect of my teaching career has been getting to capture the imagination of young people who have had minimal dreams for themselves and to help them to reach for something better—whether it be a decision to apply to a top university rather than the local two-year college or to work toward a scholarship for a prestigious summer program. Another rewarding aspect of my career is that I have had hundreds of students who have taken only one AP course in all of their 4 years of high school and that is AP psychology. I also find it gratifying when a student who has not done high quality work finally produces an excellent piece of writing. I do not give out praise unless deserved and thereby students realize that it is genuine and relish it.

The four major aspects of teaching are relating, innovating, evaluating, and motivating and each is essential for effective teaching and linked with the others. With this in mind, I think about each class immediately after it is over, and at the end of each day, I write notes on what went well and what could have gone better. I do item analyses of each of question on every test and have discovered very common errors that have occurred over the years with

many students. I also develop challenging, encompassing, and motivating essay questions for each chapter of the text .

To continue to be a better teacher, I read constantly. For example, I read American Psychological Association (APA) and American Psychological Society (APS) journals, current psychology books, and articles from *Scientific American*, *American Scientist*, *Natural History Magazine*, and *Cerebrum*. I have been leading AP Psychology workshops for 12 years and do so each summer. I am also glad to have attended the AP National Conference for each of the last 4 years. I have also been fortunate enough to have been a member of the AP Psychology test development committee for the last few years.

Advice for New Teachers

New teachers should be passionate about their subject area, devoted to their students, and always believe that their students can do what they are able to do not just what they want to do.

[†] From T. A. Benson, C. Burke, A. Amstadter, R. Siney, V. Hevern, B. Beins, & W. Buskist, (Eds.), *Teaching psychology in autobiography: Perspectives from exemplary psychology teachers* (pp. 85-89). Society for the Teaching of Psychology. Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/tia/index.html>