

“Pay It Forward”:

Reinvesting the Dividends that *My* Teachers Earned in *Me*

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Some readers may have watched the 2000 film *Pay It Forward* ... but more about this later. All of the teacher autobiographies are requested to have the exact same format – right down to identical headings. And the introduction (“not labeled as such, though,” according to the detailed instructions), is expected to specify my “current position, title, and affiliation; work and educational histories; award and honors received; and any other notable facts about yourself related to your professional life as a teacher” – this all in “no more than 500 words.” Well, I’ve already used almost 100 words, leaving me with only around 400 to cover what I’m supposed to be writing about in the introductory section (and now, at this point, even much fewer). So here is my customary mini-resume, sliced down to – wait ... I’ve got to conduct another word count – little more than 350 words:

I am Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Davis. In 1970 I earned my B.A. in psychology from Occidental College, a small liberal arts institution in Los Angeles. I did my graduate work in the social psychology program at Harvard University, earning my MA and PhD there in 1973 and 1975, respectively. I taught at the University of Arkansas for two years before becoming an assistant professor at my current university in 1976. Hence, I’ve now taught at UCD for over 30 years. I’ve been fortunate to earn numerous awards for both research and teaching. Among the research awards are the William James Book Award and the George A. Miller Outstanding Article Award both from the Society for General Psychology (Division 1 of the American Psychological Association), the Theoretical Innovation Prize from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (APA Division 8), the Rudolf Arnheim Award for Outstanding Achievement in Psychology and the Arts from the Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts (APA Division 10), the Sir Francis Galton Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Study of Creativity from the International

Association of Empirical Aesthetics, and the Award for Excellence in Research from the Mensa Education and Research Foundation. Teaching honors include the Magnar Ronning Award for Teaching Excellence of the Associated Students at the University of California, Davis, the Distinguished Teaching Award of the Academic Senate of the University of California, Davis Division, the UC Davis Prize for Teaching and Scholarly Achievement of the UC Davis Foundation, and the Robert S. Daniel Award for Four Year College/University Teaching from the same society (STP) that's publishing this collection of teacher autobiographies – and the connection that led to the invitation to write this contribution to that very anthology. I've also engaged in many other activities associated with my teaching career. For example, I've delivered talks on teaching before diverse audiences, both intramural and extramural, and have published on the subject in various venues, including publications directed at students. But I cannot give any details because I will run out of my 500 words by the time I finish this sentence.

My Early Development as a Teacher

Pay It Forward starred Kevin Spacey, Helen Hunt, and Haley Joel Osment. I will have more to say about the characters they play, but first I have to return to the prescribed content of this section. At this point I am instructed to answer four questions about the process by which I became a teacher. The first question is whether I received any special instruction for teaching in graduate school. Now depressing! The answer is no. Because Harvard was far more interested in research than teaching, they had no formal course devoted to the latter subject. Except for serving as a teaching assistant in some courses and some guest lectures, I did nothing to prepare myself for my main occupation. The same answer holds for the second question regarding whether I had any teaching mentor or mentors. Again, a resounding no. Mentoring was again strongly directed toward research. Except for watching my own teachers teach, and trying to glean what I could from those implicit demonstrations, teaching instruction was minimal.

In fact, I had somewhat less training than most graduate students. I entered Harvard with two fellowships that paid tuition and living expenses for four full years: a National Science Foundation Fellowship designed to support promising scientists and a Danforth Foundation Fellowship designed to support promising teachers. The former I used my first two years, the latter my last two years. As an unfortunate consequence of this ample support was that I had no need to earn money as a teaching assistant. Indeed, it was not until the end of my graduate training that I was even allowed to assume any responsibilities besides full-time study. That meant that I missed out on a lot of the implicit instructional training that most students experience in graduate school.

This circumstance brings me to the third question: If I lacked any formal training and had no teaching mentors, then how did I manage to teach myself to become a competent teacher? Well, actually, I cannot address this issue without also answering the fourth and last question of this section: What factors led me to the decision to become a university teacher? I was the first born in my family – and with three younger siblings. Very early in my life I acquired many opportunities to assume the role often occupied by the eldest: the proxy parent, the teacher, the mentor. Later on, after I became interested in science, I began to expand my circle of “students” beyond the immediate family. I would enthrall various neighborhood kids with scientific demonstrations – the most popular being chemistry experiments in which solutions changed color, liquids fizzed over, and bottles exploded. Later still, when I started taking chemistry in high school, I began to fantasize about teaching the same subject at the same level. In fact, I originally entered college with a major in chemistry and with the aspiration of getting a secondary level teaching credential. Through a number of significant encounters – all mediated

by my teachers – I ended up as a psychology major who wanted to become a professor at a liberal arts college.

Once I had made the decision to become a teacher I began to observe my teachers more carefully. What did my favorite instructors do to earn my admiration? What did my least preferred teachers do to receive my condemnation? Of course, mere observation was not sufficient to answer these questions. In the absence of formal training or mentoring, nothing can substitute for direct experience in the classroom. Once I began teaching full time, I began to learn the teaching ins and outs or dos and don'ts by the clumsy but simple process of trial and error. It is for this reason that the quality of my teaching has gradually improved over the years. I certainly did not start out as an excellent instructor. It was an expertise that had to be cultivated over decades of teaching. That learning process continues to this day.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

Spacey plays a grade-school teacher who, on the first day of class, presents his students with an unusual assignment for the year – but to my assigned task. I have to talk about teaching in higher education, not in K-12. More specifically, I am charged with addressing two matters: (a) whether I've ever had to overcome obstacles in my teaching and (b) whether I've felt a tension between my teaching and research. Happily, the second issue is the answer to the first issue. To some extent teaching and research responsibilities constitute a “zero-sum game.” This is especially the case at a research university where the expectations are explicitly “publish or perish.” As noted earlier, my original aspiration was to become a professor at a liberal arts institution where the expectations were “teach or topple.” This was merely an extension of teaching ambitions going back to high school. It was not until graduate school that I chanced upon a set of empirical and theoretical problems that could inspire a career of scientific research.

As a result, the opportunities afforded by a research university began to look more attractive, and the bulk of my job applications were aimed at such institutions. This shift in career goal had a direct repercussion on my teaching aspirations. Because I had to publish lots of articles in the best journals in order to secure tenure, my growth as a teacher was very slow. That's not to say that I was a bad or mediocre instructor. Even at a major research university a young faculty member has to establish teaching competence! Rather it was simply the case that there were no strong incentives to put as much effort in teaching as I was doing in research.

Accordingly, only after I was promoted to associate professor could I begin to invest more time in improving my teaching performance. And that self-improvement effort accelerated even more after I was promoted to full professor. Nevertheless, these promotions were not the sole factors contributing to a shift in emphasis. More crucial was a change in how I perceived my career goals. No longer was the object to become an excellent teacher or an excellent researcher. On the contrary, my aim had expanded to a much more inclusive end – to become an excellent university *professor*. That shift meant that my responsibilities had to expand even more. In addition to teaching and research I had to expand my service activities at all levels, whether the department, college, university, profession, or community. In short, the goal was to pursue a truly balanced academic life. This choice may seem to aggravate the supposed zero-sum game. After all, time allotted to service must detract from time assigned to either teaching or research. Yet this conflict only holds if one loses sight of the fact that a university professor must be accomplished in all three areas. Even the weakest link must be strong.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

Spacey's assignment is for each student to come up with an idea that would change the world and then put it into action. One of the students, performed by Osment, comes up with just

such an idea and puts it into practice. The idea will have amazing consequences for many persons in his life, including his teacher, himself, and his alcoholic mother, who is played by Hunt. But, again, I digress. Furthermore, this is not a section in which there's much latitude for digressions. That's because the writers of these essays were instructed to answer five distinct questions, a higher number than in any other section. So perhaps the most efficient response is to deal with each question one by one.

First on the docket is the classic query that must be answered by all instructors who are deeply committed to their role as teacher: What principles rest at the heart of my personal teaching philosophy? This query has a two-part response: (a) I would use the singular "principle" rather than the plural "principles" because I believe that my philosophy of teaching can be subordinated to a single tenet and (b) why would I address that question now? Wouldn't it be better to save it for desert? So I will.

Second on the agenda is the matter of how my approach to teaching has changed over the course of my academic career. As mentioned earlier, one of the main changes is the linkage of teaching with research and service. I have learned to see all three activities as essential parts of one enterprise – that of being a well-rounded university professor. Nevertheless, it's critical to specify that this linkage is more than a simple matter of making sure that one spends comparable amounts of time on each activity. Teaching, research, and service should be integrated as much as possible. The greater is the degree of that integration, the more the three responsibilities become mutually reinforcing rather than competitive. For instance, I have involved over 300 students in my research, providing them with first-hand experience with the process of creating new knowledge. At the same time, many of these students have made indispensable contributions to some of my best work. Likewise, many of my service activities have positive

consequences for both teaching and research. Consider the inconvenient chore of providing reviews for submitted manuscripts and grant proposals. Besides fulfilling a professional obligation I am staying at the leading edge of research in my field, thereby ensuring that I remain up-to-date as both teacher and researcher.

Listed third among the questions in this section is actually two distinct issues, but end up being one. First, what do I find most rewarding about teaching? Second, what are the greatest frustrations and how do I overcome them? For me, teaching's greatest reward is to see students get excited about new ideas. This may take the form of questions during lectures that show a spark of curiosity or wonder, comments in discussions that display unexpected insights, or passages in essay exams or term papers that reveal an unusual enthusiasm for the material. So my greatest frustration is when I experience none of these things – when a student just asks “will we have to know this on the exam?” or doses off in discussion sections or regurgitates back knowledge only half-digested. So much of my effort as a teacher is devoted to increasing the rewards and decreasing the frustrations. Consequently, I've tried out all kinds of instructional techniques to make the course material more interesting and engaging.

The fourth of this section's issues concerns how I evaluate my teaching. Any answer must begin with student evaluations. Fortunately, the department where I work has created an extremely detailed questionnaire by which students assess my teaching – assessments that cannot be ignored. Then there are other forms of useful information, such as the students' performance on tests, assignments, and discussion as well as the questions they raise in class or during office hours. Although these kinds of feedback are most instructive for immediate improvements in teaching performance, another variety of feedback is far more valuable for telling you that

you've really hit the mark – the letters from former students who, many years later, express gratitude for your teaching efforts.

Last but perhaps most critical is the fifth question: How do I go about improving my teaching? Well, I try out everything. I'm constantly testing new techniques and technologies, new ways of organizing the material or making a particular point. Some of these innovations I come up with on my own whereas others I acquire from external sources, such as STP's own journal *The Teaching of Psychology*. Occasionally, I live to regret the implementation of a novel instructional approach, but most of the time the result is some increment, however small, to my teaching effectiveness. I believe that there are more hits than misses largely because the mere act of introducing a new method serves to revitalize your treatment of the material. It's much like the famed Hawthorne Effect in industrial psychology where a workplace intervention has a positive effect just because there was an intervention in the first place.

Advice for New Teachers

This whole essay has to be shorter than 3,000 words, and I've already used up over 2,500, so I've got to quickly deal with preordained topic of this section. Luckily, the essay's instructions contains but one: What advice would I give to someone who wanted to become an excellent teacher? Part of the answer has already been touched upon in previous sections. Be willing to experiment and remain open to new possibilities. Learn from the experiences and recommendations of other teachers – such as printed in various STP publications, including the volumes of *The Teaching of Psychology in Autobiography*. Yet at the same time remain aware that what works for others may not work for you, and visa-versa. Moreover, what's effective in one course may be ineffective in another. In fact, what worked for you when you're young may

not work when you're older, and thus the optimal teaching tactics must constantly evolve during the course of your career. Last, but not least ...

Oh, I almost forgot! I need to specify the student's brilliant idea in *Pay It Forward*. The goal was not to pay favors back but rather to pay them forward – hence the film's title. In particular, good deeds would be paid forward by doing good deeds to three new people. The recipients of those favors would then pay forward the benevolence toward a new set of people. The circle of good will would expand outward in a kind of benign pyramid scheme turned inside out. Static reciprocity is replaced with an exponentially growing altruism.

Final Thoughts

Isn't that what good teaching is all about? Every teacher was once a student. And when we look back to our student days don't we always remember favorite teachers who left an impression that will remain with us forever? I certainly do. I still recall the 3rd-grade teacher who first sparked my scientific curiosity and artistic imagination. I remember a high school instructor who first made me feel like I could go to college and become a chemistry teacher. I can still visualize the college professor whose lectures and discussions inspired me to change my major to psychology. I have reaped the benefits bestowed upon me by my best teachers. But I'm not paying them back. How could I possibly do so anyway? Now all are either retired from work or retired from the world! So instead I have accumulated the dividends that I earned from their investments in me and then have reinvested those dividends in my own students – with the hope that they will reinvest in a yet wider sphere of beneficiaries. Those beneficiaries may be another generation of students. Or they may be colleagues at work, children at home, friends, family – it makes no difference. As long as everyone still pays it forward.

Word count: 2,999 < 3,000 (whew!)