

Nothing More Than a University Professor Engaged in Teaching, Research, and Service: Nor Less

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My official title is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Davis. In 1970 I earned my BA 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 2 years before becoming an assistant professor at my current university in 1976. Hence, I have now taught at UCD for over 30 years. I have 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 Society for the Teaching of Psychology. I have also engaged in many other activities associated with my teaching career. For example, I have 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.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I did not receive any special instruction for teaching in graduate school. Harvard faculty members are far more interested in research than teaching. In fact, at present not a single Harvard professor belongs to the Society for the Teaching of Psychology! Consequently, the program had no formal course devoted to instruction. Except for serving as a teaching assistant in some courses and some guest lectures, I did nothing to prepare myself for a significant responsibility

of my current occupation. In addition, I did not have any mentors who helped me toward my teaching career. Mentoring at graduate school 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.

Even worse, 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.

If I lacked any formal training and had no teaching mentors, then how did I manage to teach myself to become a competent teacher? I cannot address this issue without first discussing the factors that led me to the decision to become a university teacher. I believe that the critical developmental factor was that 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

Because I have maintained a highly productive research program in which I have averaged around 10 publications per year, establishing myself as an excellent instructor was not easy. To some extent teaching and research responsibilities constitute a “zero-sum game,” which is especially the case at a research university like UC Davis 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 is 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 broaden 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: 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

Under this heading I should address five distinct questions: (a) how my approach to teaching has changed over the course of my academic career?; (b) what are the rewards and frustrations of teaching?; (c) how my teaching is evaluated?; (d) how I go about improving my teaching?; and (e) what is my philosophy of teaching?

1. How has my approach to teaching 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 is 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 more than 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. During the course of my career I have averaged more than 16 evaluations per year. Besides fulfilling a professional obligation, I believe that these assessments enhance both my research and my teaching. By staying at the leading edge of research in my field I am ensuring that I remain up-to-date as both teacher and researcher.

2. What do I find are the rewards and frustrations of teaching? 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 have tried out all kinds of instructional techniques to make the course material more interesting and engaging. To illustrate one of my distinctive tactics, I have accumulated an extensive wardrobe of T-shirts to go with each one of my lectures. To stimulate curiosity, the connection is seldom immediately obvious, so that students are obliged to listen carefully until the rationale for the specifically selected apparel is finally revealed. Thus, in my lecture on British evolutionists in the History of Psychology it is not until I begin the biography of Charles Darwin that they realize why I'm wearing a shirt carrying the visage of Abraham Lincoln (in sunglasses, no less).

3. How do 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 me that I have really hit the mark—

the messages from former students who, many years later, express gratitude for your teaching efforts. A bona fide example from my personal file is the airmail letter from Israel that read “I was resting on my tractor trying to think: Who have been the most influential people in my 17 years of school? Which figures in my academic career have remained so vivid? All I could think of is Simonton.” Mementos like this more than makes up for the dozens of students who never took advantage of what I was trying to offer. They document that my teaching has become a lasting part of my students’ lives.

4. How do I go about improving my teaching? Well, I try out everything. I am 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 the 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 my treatment of the material. It is 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.

5. What is my philosophy of teaching? Although this question is frequently asked, I have often wondered about the rationale for raising such an issue. Scientists are seldom asked about their “philosophy of research”—or even about their philosophy of science. Those who are most engaged in doing top-flight science are least likely interested in philosophizing about their activities, whereas those who are most involved in such abstract contemplations are less disposed to conduct scientific research. A similar disjunction occurs in the area of service. Departmental chairs and college deans are seldom expected to report their “philosophy of service,” and I doubt that most would be able to provide a decent answer if it were posed to them. Those who could provide elaborate intellectualizations are probably spending too little time on the nuts and bolts of their administrative responsibilities. Besides, what answer can surpass a very simple one: To do the best job possible? No matter what activity I am involved in—whether teaching, research, or service—I always ask myself “Why not the best?” To be sure, teaching will impose constraints on research, research will place restrictions on service, and service will necessitate some compromises in teaching. So the university professor is required to optimize all three contributions simultaneously rather than piecemeal. Hence, the real criterion should be: How can I maximize my contributions as a professor of psychology at a research university? If that counts as a teaching philosophy, then I have one. If not, then I do not.

Advice for New Teachers

Would I have any advice for 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 publications, including the two 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 might be effective in one course may be ineffective in another. In fact, what worked for you when you are young may not work when you are older, and thus the optimal teaching tactics must constantly evolve during the course of your career. Most importantly, what works for one kind of student or institution may not work for another. In particular, the opportunities and challenges are contingent on whether the instructor is teaching at a high school, a community college, a liberal arts college, or a research university. Each educational environment represents a unique niche into which each teacher must discern the optimal route to instructional improvement.

Final Thoughts

Apropos of the comment that closed the last section, I should observe that most of the teachers invited to contribute to this autobiographical series are employed at institutions where the priority is placed squarely on teaching rather than research. No doubt only a small percentage of authors besides me can list more than 300 scientific publications on their curriculum vitae. And I am certainly among the few chapter authors who have received more awards as a scientist than as an instructor. Therefore, I would like to direct my last remarks specifically to potential readers who are affiliated with institutions where research is emphasized far more than teaching.

Whether you are a graduate student or a professor in such a program, you may feel lots of pressure to publish as much as you can in top-tier journals. This pressure can then push you to minimize the effort you devote to your students, especially the undergraduates majoring in psychology. Nonetheless, I hope my personal story proves that excellent teaching is not incompatible with outstanding research. It is possible to be invited to write one of these chapters and still receive awards for scientific contributions. Nor am I an oddity. Since 1987 my university has bestowed an annual \$30,000 award to that faculty member who combines outstanding undergraduate instruction with an internationally recognized program of original research. So far, two of the recipients are faculty in UCD's Department of Psychology!

Besides, given what I said earlier, you should do the best you can to balance the divergent responsibilities of your position. You are in the process of becoming, or already have become, a professor. That means that you are neither a researcher nor a teacher, but both—and much, much more. Accordingly, if you short-change your teaching, you become less of a *university* professor.