

# **Lessons Learned:**

## **Practical Advice for the Teaching of Psychology**

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We must thank Doug Bernstein from the University of Illinois, who through his superb work overseeing the National Institute for the Teaching of Psychology, has provided a forum that sustains us year after year. Charles Brewer, former editor of the journal *Teaching of Psychology*, has helped us with our teaching, our writing, and has inspired interest in the process of and research on teaching.

Most importantly, we thank the contributors to the *APS Observer* Teaching Tips column. All have provided thoughtful writings and have tolerated our requests for more ideas and drafts with equanimity and a collegial spirit. Their willingness to spend the time and effort to contribute is greatly appreciated. We are pleased that several authors are from other countries, providing evidence that psychology truly is taught and valued around the globe.

Baron Perlman  
Lee I. McCann  
Susan H. McFadden  
June, 2001



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## Preface

*. . . in lecture halls, seminar rooms, field settings, labs, and even electronic classrooms—the places where most people receive most of their formal education—teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal—or keep them from learning much at all.*

—Palmer, 1998

### Origins of the *APS Observer* Teaching Tips Columns

In 1993, Lee I. McCann and Barry Perlman attended the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) conference cosponsored by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of South Florida. Neither of us had attended a teaching conference before, but the presentations listed in the brochure were appealing and we had some teaching data to present. The conference was so stimulating that we have returned every year since to enjoy good conversation with colleagues about teaching and to garner new ideas on how to teach better.

One outcome of attending NITOP was our desire to share its focus on teaching with others. Alan Kraut, executive director of the American Psychological Society (APS), now the Association for Psychological Science, was in attendance in 1994—when APS began cosponsoring the conference—and we talked with him about an article we had written for the *APS Observer* on how to obtain a first teaching job, with advice on preparing and presenting one's teaching abilities and credentials. Was APS interested in an ongoing column about teaching? One thing led to another, and conversations with Alan Kraut and Lee Herring, then editor of the *Observer*, moved at a lively pace. Within a few months, the Teaching Tips column was a reality, with one of our colleagues at University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, Susan H. McFadden, joining us as a coeditor.

Since beginning the editing of Teaching Tips, we have found authors, and some have found us. It is a fun and exciting process, and we continue to learn a tremendous amount about teaching.

We wanted to present teaching information in a lively format, avoiding the scholarly writing style to which most of us are accustomed. We hope it is fun for authors to write in this manner and a pleasant change of pace for readers.

## The Book's Rationale and Purpose

Except for rare exceptions, all faculty teach, and teaching is receiving more emphasis and attention in the popular press, legislative bodies, and on college campuses. Campuses of all sizes are discovering or rediscovering either voluntarily, or in response to outside forces, the importance of good teaching.

In that spirit, we developed the Teaching Tips column with the goals of:

- ◆ Informing undergraduate, graduate, and future faculty (teaching assistants), about both the content and methods of teaching;
- ◆ Bringing a wide variety of teaching topics to the attention of teachers of psychology; and
- ◆ Enhancing the teaching of psychology, and thus improving the quality of the education our students receive.

## Overview

This book is a practical presentation of the processes and issues involved in the teaching of psychology. It consists of eight sections, each composed of *APS Observer* Teaching Tips columns. One article by Sechrest et al. preceded Tips but was written in the same style and spirit, and is included. Contributions explore topics ranging from specific teaching tasks (e.g., writing a syllabus) to more general teaching issues (e.g., handling the difficult student). Authors were asked to supply recommended readings for the original columns and many have chosen to update them for this publication. Each column stands alone, although in the actual teaching of a course over a semester, many of the topics interconnect. After reading each column, readers should have several new teaching ideas to think about, and be able to implement those of interest.

The typical reader will be a college or university psychology faculty member, but the book is also useful for high school teachers of psychology. Faculty in other disciplines will find the book a valuable resource for their teaching as well. For new teachers, the book is a starting point. For the experienced teacher, it is a resource to consult. Additionally, teaching assistants and their supervisors in psychology and other graduate programs will find this book useful, as will new faculty and their mentors.

### *Recommended Readings and References*

Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

***Part 1***

**Steps in a Teacher's Life**



## Chapter 1

# How to Land that First Teaching Job

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Teaching is a major factor in faculty role definition—and teaching experience is an important hiring criterion—at hundreds of psychology departments in regional universities and liberal arts colleges across the nation. Teaching also is being emphasized increasingly at many doctoral institutions. Because instruction consumes almost two-thirds (64 percent) of faculty work time (Bowen & Schuster, 1986), we maintain that academic job applicants should consider how best to present their teaching experiences and ability.

## Applying for the Position

The materials applicants provide to recruitment committees should communicate their preparedness to teach and their understanding of teaching and its place in higher education. An applicant should avoid being perceived as apathetic toward teaching or as viewing teaching as a secondary activity (or *necessary evil*).

An applicant should want to create the impression in others that he/she is a future academician who sees teaching as a serious and indispensable part of academic life. A concern for excellent teaching is not antithetical to being a first-rate scholar, and it may in fact be highly correlated with teaching skills. Displaying an ability to teach will not diminish your competitiveness for an academic position.

## Demonstrate Your Teaching Awareness

To demonstrate teaching skills, candidates should present information on their teaching experiences. For example, candidates who have participated in a first-rate teaching assistant program and/or a graduate seminar on teaching should describe what they have learned from these experiences.

## Document Your Teaching Abilities

If you are presently teaching, you should ask those writing letters of recommendation to observe your teaching. Search committees often read letters saying: “I have not observed Sam/Sally teach, but I am sure he/she will be an excellent teacher.” Certainly your mentors would not say you exhibit promise to be an excellent scholar, if they had no familiarity with your scholarship! It is helpful if individuals writing recommendations can document their knowledge of your teaching philosophy and/or your efforts to improve teaching.

## Develop a Teaching Portfolio

You may want to create a *Teaching Portfolio* to include in your application materials. This portfolio would include your teaching statement (described below), course syllabi, teaching evaluations from courses you have taught, and any other information related to teaching that the search committee requests.

**The Teaching Statement**—The teaching statement is of special importance, as it is the only chance you may have to detail your ideas and skills related to teaching. We urge job applicants to write a teaching statement, whether one is requested or not. In a recent recruitment, our position announcement requested statements for both teaching and research interests. Of 156 applicants, only 35 (22 percent) provided teaching statements (Perlman, Marxen, McFadden, & McCann, 1993).

To write an articulate and meaningful teaching statement, candidates must: (a) think about teaching and discuss it with others; and (b) read about the subject. If you have done this reading, you stand out among peers in the academic job hunt. A model of teaching, such as the one presented by McFadden and Perlman (1989), can help structure your ideas about teaching. Other sources might include the journal *Teaching of Psychology*, which for 20 years has been a forum for teaching information in our discipline. Another source would be the quarterly journal *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*. More generally, there are numerous books about the improvement of teaching (e.g., Eble, 1976; Lowman, 1984; McKeachie, 1994).

Candidates who are articulate about teaching—and who have given the art and craft of teaching some thought before arriving on campus for an interview—distinguish themselves as individuals motivated to serve the needs of students and to join collegially with faculty in the teaching enterprise.

**Teaching Experience**—You should have teaching experience. In addition to teaching at your home institution as a TA, you may want to consider ad hoc teaching at a nearby institution as you finish your doctorate. Respon-

sibility for a complete course is important in learning what it means to teach. You may want to suggest submitting a videotape of your teaching to the recruitment committee.

### **Campus Visit**

Teach a class. We urge finalists for an academic position who have been invited for a campus visit to request the opportunity to teach a class. Using a colloquium to evaluate teaching abilities and potential is a time honored tradition, but why not actual teaching? Prepare a lecture with requisite overheads and other teaching aids, and demonstrate your teaching ability while getting a chance to interact with the students you would be teaching if hired.

### **Meet with Students**

We also urge candidates to ask to meet with undergraduates. You want to discover their perspectives on the psychology department, and what they need and value in teaching faculty. Their questions and your answers will give both you and the students information about the fit between your expertise and interests as well as the students' needs.

### **Ask About Mentoring**

In addition, you should learn what kind of mentoring takes place regarding teaching. The academic Darwinian notion of "survival of the fittest" is being replaced at many institutions with mentoring programs. Becoming an expert teacher is a developmental process that takes years.

### **Talk with Department Faculty**

Talk with department faculty about teaching. For example, what courses do they teach? What observations can they share with you about teaching? What is taught across the curriculum (e.g., ethics, scientific method, writing), if anything? Try not to focus too much on your needs or wants, but attempt to determine what is needed to best serve the students and department and to describe the contributions you could make.

### **Conclusion**

We urge candidates to attend to teaching when applying for academic positions and during academic position interviews. Your subject matter expertise is not the equivalent of being, or having the potential to become, a good teacher. It is our experience in working with and mentoring new faculty that they often experience a shock during their first two years of teaching, finding that class preparation and teaching require much more time and energy than anticipated.

The unfortunate result is disillusionment, frustration, and dissatisfaction with academic life. Use both graduate school and the search process as preparation for a career as an academician who knows and cares about teaching.

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