

# Observations on Teaching

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*Whatever is rushed to maturity will surely break down early. Whatever is accomplished in a hurry will surely be easily destroyed. (Zen Lessons, 1989, p. 33).*

This final *Teaching Tips* column under our editorship looks back and seeks to summarize the important, prevailing ideas in *Teaching Tips* over the last 15 years. We read *Teaching Tips* from its inception to the conclusion of our editorship, 107 writings. What did they tell us? What is left unsaid? We sought substantive ideas that would withstand the test of time. Our observations emphasize the paradoxes that infuse the practice of teaching; they reveal why good teaching can be so difficult, but at the same time, understanding them can assist us in teaching well.

## ***Be Intentional in Your Teaching***

Read our columnists' work revealed the many nuances of teaching. Decisions on planning our courses, what to teach in today's class, and how to teach it, all have as their goal positive outcomes for both students and teachers. We should be, but are often not, intentional about how and why we teach the way we do. Good teachers plan and are mindful of the decisions they make regarding what they do, and do not do, in their teaching. That is the theme of *Teaching Tips*: assisting teachers in careful consideration of ideas about teaching, and in deciding deliberately whether to integrate and adopt them. Ideally, we have a well considered reason for everything we do in the classroom and with our students.

Our actions (teachable moments and the spontaneity in the present notwithstanding) should be planned, the result of thoughtful consideration and, when possible, rehearsal or practice. For example, syllabus preparation starts with a consideration of what material will be covered, and tough choices about what it will not be possible to include. Our lectures should be well organized with thoughtful, real world examples that will hold student attention and facilitate retention. Our discussion topics should be relevant to course content and interesting (we hope) to our students, and our exams should be carefully constructed. We should be aware that much teaching and student learning takes place outside of the classroom and be available to our students, urging them to talk with us in other environments like our offices or laboratories.

There are many things we can do to move us closer to these ideal levels of course preparation. Seeking the advice of other instructors who do a good job in the classroom is a natural place to start, and has the benefit of helping teachers develop the sense of community that is so important in sustaining them. There also are many other sources of useful ideas, including various books, journals, and conferences that focus on teaching.

## ***Undergraduate Psychology is part of a Liberal Education***

One of the most striking themes we noted in reviewing all the *Tips* columns is the way the teaching of psychology exemplifies the ideals of a liberal education. According to a statement by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Liberal education requires that we understand the

foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities (AAC&U, 1998).

To teach and study psychology is to stand at the crossroads of these facets of a liberal education: acquiring knowledge, mastering skills, testing truth claims, understanding contextual influences, and making connections to the world outside the academy. Several *TIPS* authors addressed the teaching of scientific methodology and offered suggestions on how to help students grasp the meaning of the scientific enterprise as applied to behavior and mental processes. In addition to discussing how to teach the methods of science, some columns provided advice on teaching students skills like writing and quantitative thinking. Others focused on content, relating how psychology courses invite the integration of other disciplines, such as biology, mathematics, and even law.

*TIPS* authors also showed there are many ways to draw connections among various domains of knowledge. For example, cross-cultural psychology can be taught as a stand-alone course, or it can be incorporated into nearly every other course typically taught to undergraduates. Likewise, many institutions require psychology majors to take a course on the history of the discipline, although Michael Wertheimer argued that “history belongs in every course” (Wertheimer, 1999). The arts are the only subject area of liberal education not addressed in any *TIPS* columns, so we leave that rich area of psychological research and practice for future authors. It is worth noting, however, that Henry Gleitman, one of the most widely respected authors of an introductory textbook in the last decades, insisted on incorporating the arts into his presentation of the field to new students of psychology.

As noted in the AAC&U statement, a liberal education not only provides foundations for knowledge and methods of inquiry, but also recognizes the ethical principles that are essential to gaining knowledge and using it wisely. Again, our review of *TIPS* columns shows how seriously psychologists take their ethical responsibilities as they teach and supervise student research. Finally, in addition to providing knowledge and skills for inquiry, writing, and statistical analysis, teachers of psychology increasingly structure service learning into their classes as a way of helping students make meaningful “connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities” (AAC&U, 1998). Several *TIPS* columns described innovative ways of helping students make those connections.

Psychology teachers have wonderful opportunities to assist students’ preparation for an educated life. Teachers must accept, however, that we often do not know if and how our efforts and values influence students in their future lives. This is a form of uncertainty that faculty need to learn to accept.

### ***Teaching Needs Both the Intellectual and the Emotional***

Part of what we describe above is intellectual, the cognitive processes of designing courses, working with students, presenting theory, research findings, biography, and example. Reason is not enough, however. Good teaching requires passion, enthusiasm, and joy; it is these that provide the bridge from the intellectual to students’ understanding, and open the door for students to step over the threshold to confront and understand psychology.

**Teaching requires compromise.** As we lay out our courses, and choose from a wide array of possible themes and important skills for students, we make a thousand reasoned decisions. *TIPS* authors would

each have us choose their ideas and approaches to teaching, ones in which they believe deeply and passionately. We cannot, however, choose them all. We must engage in what we call “the compromises of teaching.” Teachers are faced with decisions about what content makes up the core in a course, how much is necessary to give a course validity, and how students will learn this content. At the same time a myriad of other learning experiences and skills exist for students (e.g., writing, group work, ethics, history, classic research, knowledge of the people who are psychologists). Time is finite in teaching any course, the options almost infinite.

Teaching compromises are one reason that teaching is hard work and all teachers feel they come up short. Many teachers lament the losses that result from these compromises (“I had to leave out the chapter on \_\_\_\_\_,” “I wanted to have students do \_\_\_\_\_ but they are doing enough as it is”). Compromises of teaching need to be made wisely.

**Emotion.** As amply revealed in *TIPS* columns over the last 15 years, teaching psychology is not simply about information transfer from teacher to student. Some time after we started editing these columns, the internet revolution burst widely upon intellectual life with an enormous, and sometimes confusing, array of information, along with a proliferation of strategies for accessing that information. Although most of us now celebrate the manifold intellectual resources we mine through the internet, we have not yet concluded that teachers are irrelevant to the learning process.

It is emotion — our passion and enthusiasm — that motivates students to stretch themselves intellectually. Recognizing the important place of emotion in teaching does not mean that a teacher needs a demonstrative style; even the quietest teachers can be passionate about their subject matter, and about what they expect from the time they spend with their students. This exultation in learning is contagious, seductive, and enrapturing, all good things in teaching.

It is our passion for our subject and the pursuit of knowledge that enables us to cope with the inevitable frustrations of the professoriate. Enthusiasm and even joy in teaching and learning not only give us the stamina to slog through the occasional bad class session, but these positive emotions “broaden and build” our “thought-action repertoires” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 221), producing creativity in how we think about teaching, willingness to try new approaches to teaching, and openness to the “individual growth and social connection” (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 224) that can arise from being intentional about teaching and sharing that intentionality with others.

### ***Teachers Need to Think about Teaching and Develop over Time***

We frequently talk about teachers as if they are all the same. We all know this is not the case. For example, in our *Teaching Tips* columns we have senior faculty presenting ideas for their colleagues and junior faculty doing the same. As teachers age they represent different cohorts to their students, and students teach teachers with their questions, ideas and passions. As one would expect, teachers change as they age, and as they teach more, often because of self critical reflection, facing the challenges of staying intellectually alive, or due to changes in the nature of our students as new generations appear in our classes.

**Taking time to reflect about teaching.** Our tightly structured lives are filled to the brim with activities that include teaching both inside and outside the classroom, conducting and supervising research, doing administrative work, serving on committees, writing grant proposals and journal articles, etc. Amidst all the busy-ness, faculty members often feel little leeway to read and think without an immediate goal, or

to structure critical self-examination into their schedules. We know from the stress and coping literature how important it is to feel in control of one's life, and yet often faculty feel anything but in control. Recognizing this, several *TIPS* columns through the years have specifically addressed the importance of faculty taking care of themselves, making time for intellectual growth, and monitoring their teaching attitudes and behaviors. For example, in Volume 2 of *Lessons Learned* (Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 2004), authors emphasized the importance of taking time for reflection and renewal, making the effort to talk with others about teaching, doing scholarship of teaching research to improve student learning, and constructing a course portfolio to produce a comprehensive audit of how a particular class is taught. These columns plus assorted others published through the years show the multi-faceted nature of teaching psychology.

Teaching is, after all, a profoundly human enterprise, engaged in by people who have developed particular professional skills in order to discover and communicate knowledge about behavior and mental processes. These skills are essential, for sometimes we teach when we are tired, ill, grieving, worried, or distracted. Most of the time, our professionalism carries us through the hour's lecture on Pavlov when we are also thinking about the baby's temperature. Sometimes, we are acutely aware the class did not go well, while on other days we leave the lecture hall with a powerful sense of pride and accomplishment, particularly when students walk out with us, asking questions and probing for more insight into challenging issues.

**Development as teachers.** Eventually, we learn the rhythms of the academic year and the way the best and worst of classroom experiences fall onto a normal curve. This kind of learning reflects our development as teachers, both in terms of mastery of new teaching techniques but also in processes of personal maturing. The two cannot be easily separated. For example, *TIPS* columns offer numerous, detailed suggestions for incorporating new approaches to teaching psychology. These include various active learning techniques like demonstrations, role-playing, and small group discussions. Other columns address the challenges of writing good tests and giving feedback to students on their writing. If, however, we come to believe early in our careers that we know how to teach well enough and have no need to revise or change our approaches to teaching, then we reach a dual developmental stasis: avoiding critical reflection about the self and possibilities for personal development as a teacher, and rejecting opportunities to learn new approaches to teaching.

We assume that the readers of the *TIPS* columns recognize the multiple forms of development that teachers can experience. Some of this development is prompted by working with colleagues and students of different ages and cohorts. As editors of this column, we understand this well; although each of us has taught for more than three decades, we are delighted to discover what we can learn from younger colleagues and the columns they have written. Being in conversation with colleagues at different points in their careers is yet another stimulus to critical reflection about teaching. Typically, cultures assume that novices learn from experts; however, in our rapidly changing world, replete with multiple forms of expertise, experts can learn from novices. This is why some colleges and universities are exploring the idea of reciprocal mentoring. For example, the newly appointed assistant professor might work with a more experienced colleague on incorporating interactive technologies into lecture hall teaching, while the tenured full professor just a few years from retirement might help a younger faculty member think through an ethical challenge encountered in the classroom.

***Realities of Teaching that are Rarely Discussed***

In our review of *Teaching Tips*, we noted that while many useful topics have been discussed, some well-researched principles that deserve consideration in our efforts to improve teaching and student learning received little attention.

**Repetition.** Repetition is an excellent example of a principle that applies to good teaching but is rarely discussed. The Law of Frequency has been well studied over the years, but the idea that simple repetition has a positive influence on learning does not come up often in our discussions of teaching and learning, nor is it a common subject in the columns we have published over the years or in the general literature on the teaching of psychology. With so much to cover during a semester, we are reluctant to spend much time repeating something already covered even when we add in the well known benefits of distributed practice. Alas, as anyone who has asked students in upper level courses to describe classical conditioning knows, the usually lengthy discussion of this topic in Introductory Psychology has not been retained as well as we might like. Our typical curriculum with its stepped sequence of prerequisites and lower and upper level courses should provide some repetition of major topics, but still students often seem to forget course material and ideas as soon as the test is over.

**Overlearning.** Even less likely to be addressed is the usefulness of Ebbinghaus' observations about overlearning, where learning material beyond mastery adds greatly to the degree of retention. Again, we have little time in our semesters to repeat material to this degree. If we were able to do more of this or our students practiced overlearning as they studied, especially for their exams, there is little doubt that performance and grades would improve.

**The role of the student.** The amount of energy good teachers spend assisting students in the learning process is inordinate. Much of the content of the *Teaching Tips* columns concerns ideas and techniques to make our teaching better with the goal of ensuring student success, and that is as it should be. Recommendations on course design in which students can demonstrate mastery not only on exams, but in papers, group work, and so forth are but one example. The fact that students in the end must do their own learning (and that some will fail) is a universal truth far less discussed. Rather we focus on the observation and reality that teaching is hard work and pay less attention to how learning requires hard work by students. Teachers should not overlook or underestimate the difficulty of the task. One of the best ways to remember this lesson is for teachers to be students themselves on occasion, at workshops, for example. The acknowledgement by teachers that their students are asked to work hard and that they (teachers) are aware of what they are asking of their students goes a long way to establishing rapport and building within a single course a learning community made up of both teacher and students.

**Not all students can be reached.** Whereas many teachers feel they have failed if their students fail, experience teaches that teachers cannot rescue or reach all students. Even good teachers can only do so much. Some students are ill suited to being in college when we teach them, and although it can be difficult, teachers must allow students to fail if they need do so. It is often challenging for teachers to talk with students getting Ds or Fs, to inquire simply and honestly if there are things they can do to assist, but also to point out that the student may have taken too many credits, illnesses may have a greater impact than students suspected, college is more difficult than they knew, they may not be studying enough, they may want to consider leaving college knowing that they can return at a later date, or they should consider alternative educational paths including other institutions, and the like. Often it is the students who teach and rescue the teachers, telling them that they had too many part-time jobs, that they are leaving school anyway, or that the teacher should not worry, the student will retake the course.

Many teachers want their students to take risks and to get out of their “comfort zone.” Failing a course or doing poorly, if put in perspective and treated with respect and interest, may offer opportunities for students to find themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching is an honorable profession and it matters. We end with this basic theme, again widely understood but often unstated. The idea of teaching as an honorable profession has great meaning and needs to be understood and internalized if we are to sustain ourselves in it. It implies that what we as teachers do is characterized by principles of honor, that we are upright in our dealings with colleagues and students, and that we are ethical. It further implies that teachers carry themselves with dignity, that the profession has a distinguished history, and that we are standard bearers for all who have gone before us. From this perspective what we do is worthy of respect although we must be credible to earn this respect. The title of “faculty member,” and the responsibilities we accept in our role as teachers demand professionalism on our part — positive personal appearance and behavior, long hours, acceptance of teaching as a calling more than a job, and working with our students with patience and expertise.

What we do does matter. In our dealings with students and in our teaching, what we do has the potential to be substantive, to matter in their lives and ours, to make a difference. To ask for regular, demonstrable examples of such substantive difference making is to ask too much. Like parenting, teaching is at its core an act of faith that in the future what we do will be proven worthwhile. Also we can teach about substantive issues in our students’ lives or anyone’s lives for that matter. We can teach about love, loss, death, choice, pathology, and in our examples illuminate even neurobiology with ideas that matter to our students.

What we do can matter in our serving as role models for our students, and in making overt the workings of a scholarly mind — our own. The belief that teaching matters and is honorable sustains one through a semester, an academic year and a career and is the bedrock on which all of what we do must be built. All of our *TIPS* columns are at their core based on the idea that if done well, what the authors present will make a difference for students and improve the quality of their education. And when as teachers we fail — and we will and must — it is the grace, dignity and honor that we represent as teachers allow us to try again.

We wish our readers the very best in their endeavors of confronting and balancing the paradoxes and tensions of good teaching. Use your intellect to benefit your students but be mindful of the place of emotion and passion. Enjoy and seek out the mix of novices and experts in your work. While striving to become experts in the particular, save time for the awe and reverence for the universal themes of teaching that cause us pain while at the same time giving us the nurturance we need. ?

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