

# How Teaching Makes a Difference in Students' Lives

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Professor Excellent and Professor Good both work in the same psychology department at a medium-sized state university. In fact, they were hired the same year and are now in their third year as assistant professors. Dr. Excellent and Dr. Good teach similarly sized sections of introductory psychology and upper-division courses in their specialty areas. Their trajectories for tenure and promotion look promising — they both have productive labs generating top-notch articles and conference presentations, and their services to the department, college, and the discipline are exemplary.

Upon closer inspection though, there is one important difference between Dr. Excellent and Dr. Good: Despite similarities in their course grade distributions, Dr. Excellent's teaching is more impactful on students than Dr. Good's teaching. Dr. Good is not an incompetent teacher — quite the contrary. Her teaching evaluations are above average, and students comment that they have learned much from her classes and enjoy her teaching. Dr. Excellent's students, too, rate her above average — much above average, and rave about what they have learned in her classes and how much they have enjoyed them. The written portions of Dr. Excellent's teaching evaluations are telling. Many students note that Dr. Excellent has inspired them to study harder than ever before, helped them to become interested — really interested — in learning for the first time in their lives and instilled confidence in them as learners. In just the past year, three students have dropped by Dr. Excellent's office to tell her that, because of their experience in her introductory psychology course, they are changing their majors to psychology. One of these students said to her, "Dr. Excellent, I want you to know how much you have changed my life. I will never be the same again. I now have a clear idea of what I want to do, and the confidence that I can do it."

On the one hand, we all know teachers like Dr. Good. Psychology departments everywhere are filled with plenty of competent teachers like her. They represent our discipline honorably and teach its basic theories, principles, and applications well. On the other hand, we might know only one or two teachers like Dr. Excellent. Indeed, not every psychology department has a Dr. Excellent — truly exceptional teachers are rare. Like Dr. Good, these extraordinary teachers convey to students the nuts and bolts of the discipline, but they also do something much more: They somehow make a difference in students' lives: They inspire.

Making a Difference: A Teacher's  
Raison d'Être?

Should we seek to improve our teaching so that it becomes more akin to Dr. Excellent's teaching rather

than Dr. Good's? Should we talk to each other in departmental hallways and conferences about how to improve our teaching until it at least borders on excellence? Should we prepare the next generation of the psychology professoriate to make a difference in the lives of our future students? The answer to each of these questions is a resounding yes, according to one of the patriarchs of the teaching of psychology, Charles L. Brewer. In the final sentence of a book chapter in which he reflected over his long and illustrious teaching career, Brewer (2002) commented "I hope the world is a better place because we teachers make a difference to our students; after all, that is what teaching is all about" (p. 507). Brewer is one of the few persons to express this idea in print. In fact, if you look through the well known "how to" books on teaching, such as those by Davis (2009) and Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), you will find little, if anything, about making a difference in students' lives or how to do it effectively. Weimer (1993) and Fink (2003) noted that pedagogical journals follow suit by emphasizing primarily teaching techniques and how to help students learn the basic facts of one's discipline rather than inspiring students to learn beyond the course material.

Brewer is clearly onto something. After all, everyone who holds a PhD in psychology or is working toward one can probably attribute part of their desire to become a psychologist to one or two undergraduate teachers who inspired them. Those teachers make a big difference in our lives and in the future of the discipline.

Although Brewer did not specify what he meant by making a difference in students' lives or the processes involved, it is likely he envisioned the kind of impact that inspirational teachers like Dr. Excellent have on students rather than the impact of teachers like Dr. Good. There may be more at stake in teaching and learning than students getting good grades. Bill McKeachie, who wrote the bible on college and university teaching, agrees that making a difference in students' lives is not bounded by the nuts and bolts of our science as he noted when he told us, "I think we make a difference in our students by letting them know that we are committed to helping each of them become better life-long learners. Actually, it's not just giving them skills and strategies for learning, but, more important, giving them the confidence and motivation for life-long learning" (personal communication).

### What Does It Mean to Make a Difference?

Is McKeachie correct? Does the key to making a difference in students' lives rest on how a teacher helps them undergo some sort of significant personal transformation? Is inspiring a love for learning beyond the facts a defining characteristic of what it means to make a difference? Is it critically important to show students that we care about them, and how well they are learning the subject matter?

Curious about the answers to these questions, we put the matter to 173 upper-division (junior and senior) students across several courses (introductory psychology, applied behavior analysis, learning, research methods, and industrial/organizational psychology). We asked them, "Have you ever had a college or university teacher or teachers whom you felt made a genuine difference in your life in some way?" The good news is that of these students, 136 (79%) indicated that they had at least one college teacher who they felt had made a difference in their lives. The bad news is that, even after at least 3 years of college, a sizeable number of students (37, 21%) had not yet met such a teacher.

We followed up by asking the first set of students "What did this teacher(s) do to make a difference?" Our students shared with us a variety ways in which some of their teachers had made a difference in

their lives. Tops on their list (for 37 students, 27%) was that their most impactful teachers had taken a personal interest in them and helped them develop personal insights about how the subject matter was relevant to their lives. Almost as many students (29, 21%) indicated that their teacher(s) had provided encouragement in their work, which gave them confidence that they could succeed in the class and in college. Coming in a close third (28 students, 21%) was the teacher's passion for the subject matter and showing a genuine concern for student learning. Fourth on the list (19 students, 14%) was that these teachers went out of their way, "above and beyond" as some students phrased it, to help students learn the material and succeed in the course. Rounding out the top five (10 students, 7%) was that some of their teachers inspired them to learn outside of the class.

Based on these student perspectives, McKeachie's insights appear spot on: Showing students how much we care about them and their learning fuels personal insight and growth, instills personal confidence, and inspires their interest in learning in and out of the classroom. In other words, teachers who make a difference really do facilitate a significant personal transformation in the lives of their students.

### How *Not* to Make a Difference

What about the other students to whom we talked — those who reported that, at least to this point in their college careers, they had no teacher make a difference in their lives? We asked these students to share with us the reasons that they thought they had not run across this kind of teacher yet.

Most of these students (18, 49%) felt that large class sizes made it difficult, if not impossible, to develop the sort of relationship with their teachers that would allow professors to make a difference in their lives. Ten students (27%) said that their teachers gave them the clear impression that they did not care about them as students. Finally, six students (16%) said that they were neither motivated nor wanted to take the time to interact with their professors in ways that would allow their teacher to make a difference in their lives.

Although on the surface these three points appear to be at least slightly divergent, there is an underlying theme that unites them: Teaching and learning in college are personal experiences that occur within a social context. Factors that disrupt the social context make it unlikely, if not impossible, for impactful teaching to occur. Large classes in which teachers permit students to retain a significant degree of anonymity are unlikely to foster the sort of teaching that makes a difference in students' lives. Similarly, if teachers and students are not willing to explore the social context to further enhance the learning experience, impactful teaching simply won't happen.

### Teaching to Make a Difference

As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. To make a difference, teachers must be willing and able to create a conducive, social environment for learning and students have to be open to the experience of learning in this environment. The question is, of course, how to get this dance started in the first place and then how to keep it going.

In his 1999 presidential address to the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, Neil Lutsky offered a possible answer. He noted that "success in teaching depends mainly on capturing and organizing students' attention." There is perhaps no better way to capture and keep your students' attention than by

sharing your passion for psychology — and for teaching psychology — with them. Psychology’s national award-winning teachers all agree on this point (e.g., Irons et al., 2007). Teachers must be enthusiastic about their subject matter if they wish their students to become interested studying the subject matter. There is no single best way for teachers to express their passion in the classroom; it differs for all of us. However, aspects of our personal presence in the classroom such as facial expression, voice inflection, hand gestures, and body posture often suggest to students that we are particularly excited about the material we are sharing with them (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002). We might do well to heed Brewer’s (2002) oft-quoted advice: “For all your learning and teaching, develop a passion that approaches religious fervor” (p. 504).

Jane Halonen (2005, Para. 19) offered an insightful observation for maintaining your students’ interest once you have captured it. “The gift of great teachers is the ability to help students find meaning in what we ask them to learn.” Passion for the subject matter and for teaching well goes a long way in maintaining students’ interest in the course. However, teachers should never doubt the power of a good example, particularly if it is significantly connected to real life, in keeping students’ intellectually engaged in class. The learning experience is particularly powerful when students are engaged in activities that have personal relevance in understanding oneself as well as others (Fink, 2003).

Where do compelling examples come from? One could look at the classic studies in psychology — these studies are significant not merely because of elegant experimental design, but because they inform us about something particularly relevant in our lives. Fortunately, psychology has no shortage of such studies. One need not look any further than an introductory psychology text to find scores of such examples. The trick in sharing these studies with students is to tell them as a story — why the issue is important, how the study was conducted, what the specific findings were — and then relate it to some aspect of students’ lives. Telling students only about a study’s scientific value is not enough to engender interest, let alone excitement, in most students. Another source of examples rests with the students themselves. Taking time to chat with students about their interests, hobbies, and aspirations often sets the stage later for tying a psychological principle to what students are currently experiencing in their lives. For instance, through these discussions you may learn that a student’s family owns a successful small business and he or she plans to become involved in the business after graduation. Chances are that you may have several students in any one class who plan to enter the business world once they graduate. This situation provides an excellent opportunity to introduce the class to industrial/organizational psychology and to share an example or two about how this field ties to these students’ interests and aspirations. You might even ask your student with the family business to share with the class the particular problems this business typically encounters, and then provide examples of how an I/O psychologist might approach developing a solution to such issues.

Talking with students before class, after class, and at other times also shows them that you care about them as learners (Lowman, 1995; Wilson & Taylor, 2001). Demonstrating caring is an essential step in establishing rapport with your students — the contextual superglue that binds student and teacher together in the quest for learning and self-improvement. Of course, there are many elements to developing rapport with a class in addition to using real-life examples. Most of these elements consist of teacher behaviors that are easy to implement in the classroom such as smiling, calling students by name, maintaining eye contact, using inclusive language such as “we” and “us,” moving about the classroom, using humor, and being encouraging of student progress (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005; Buskist & Saville, 2001; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Titsworth, 2001; Wilson & Taylor, 2001).

## A Final Thought

Making a difference is not about *what* we teach. Rather, it is about *how* we teach. Although instructors devote untold hours to preparing lectures and classroom activities focused squarely on the subject matter, in the end making a difference in students' lives appears to have little to do with course content per se. What matters more, at least from a general student perspective, is that teachers create a supportive and caring classroom atmosphere in which they can inspire their students to become more confident, motivated, and effective life-long learners while conquering the subject matter. It is essential for teachers not only to consider how students will benefit intellectually from coursework, but also how students will benefit personally and emotionally from it. ?

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