

What My Students Taught Me: Early Teaching Experiences

December 01, 2006

The first time I stepped into my classroom, I thought: “I am going to faint.” I had already given a few lectures in some of my professors’ classes, but this time the floor was all mine. As I watched the students take their seats, take out their notebooks, and chat with each other, I realized it fell on my shoulders to take what I had learned only a few years, even a few months ago, and share that knowledge with them. Yet I had spent months preparing for this class on the psychology of interpersonal relationships, a field closely related to my research and clinical practice. I was on my own playing field, so why did it suddenly feel so awkward to face these expectant faces?

Although graduate students have accumulated a wealth of information over their years of training, it does not necessarily mean that they have been taught how to share that information with other students. Indeed, teaching is itself a skill that must be learned, through both training and practice. It is an ongoing process, involving a great deal of humility, thoroughness, and passion. I have put together the lessons I have learned over the few years since starting to teach undergraduate classes. I hope that this advice may provide some food for thought for those who are also interested in teaching psychology.

Lesson 1: Create a Positive Learning Experience

Arrive prepared. No one likes it when the person teaching the class is disorganised, cannot find his or her notes, etc. Show that you enjoy what you do and that you have put thought and effort into your presentations. Treat your students the way you would like them to treat you: with respect, diligence, and a genuine interest in the subject matter. When a student asks a question you are not sure how to answer, don’t try to bluff your way out of it. It’s ok to say that you need to look into it, but make sure you get back to the student with an answer.

Lesson 2: Listen to Your Students

The first exam I gave my students was hard. I tried to come up with questions that would test not only their understanding of the subject matter, but their ability to apply it to real situations and to link different concepts. They did not do well on the exam. During the next class, I was met with a hundred or so nasty looks and a chilling silence. I decided to take the bull by the horns and proposed that we take the first 10 minutes to discuss how the exam went. Although a few students were very critical, most provided helpful feedback on the length, the format, and the objectives of the exam. I actually used a good deal of their suggestions for that course and others in the future.

Lesson 3: Don’t Always Listen to Your Students

There is a time for humility and one for showing leadership. After every test, there are always students who spend a great deal of time debating the “raison d’être” of particular questions or the validity of answers they gave that were not deemed correct. Although some arguments have merit, students also need to understand that if they put as much effort into studying the material before the exam as they do later challenging their grades, there wouldn’t be anything to argue about. Although it may appear daunting, you are the teacher and you are allowed to say: “You do make a good point, but the answer

you gave was not the correct one.”

Lesson 4: It's Not Always What You Know, but Who You Know

Even though you have acquired a great deal of knowledge in your many years studying psychology, you probably don't know everything there is to know about every subject matter you might have to teach in class. However, one of your colleagues might be working on that very subject. Why not invite them to do a presentation in your class? It gives your students a chance to learn something from someone who is particularly at ease with the subject. As an example, I invited a colleague who specializes on adolescent “coming-out” and suicide risk, to talk about how homosexuality may impact an individual's interpersonal relationships in my “Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships” class. My students loved it, especially since it is a subject rarely addressed in most classes.

Lesson 5: Share a Little, Invent a Bit and Research a Lot

Every semester, students complete an evaluation form that provides feedback to the teacher. These are valuable teaching tools, because they provide you with information on what your students enjoyed and what they didn't enjoy. What struck me in reading these evaluations is how much students like it when we provide them with practical examples to illustrate concepts and theories taught in class. This is why I always try to find personal experiences, stories I have read, or examples taken from movies or recent news that I can use to highlight key concepts.

Lesson 6: Hope for More, but Be Prepared to Settle for Less

The last lesson I learned is that most of us hope for so much during that first class. We strive to come up with a great lesson plan, to research every subject matter thoroughly, and to present it in the most efficient manner. We hope that our students will be interested in our presentations and that they will do the assigned readings, even some additional reading, on subjects they find of particular interest. More importantly we hope that they will study hard and do well in class. This will happen with some of your students, especially if you show how committed and passionate you are about the coursework, but not with every student. Some do not take your class out of personal interest, but because it is required; some have other priorities and won't give you 100 percent the entire semester; and others won't even show up on a regular basis. It doesn't mean that you should lower your expectations, but you should be prepared for the fact that not every student is as committed to the class as, hopefully, you are.