Teaching in the University

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In the middle of a sentence I stopped lecturing.

Two hundred students sat waiting for me to say something. And, the two hundred were anticipating that my next words would be something relevant to the topic of the day's lecture.

"Ok," I said, "this is terrible. To me it feels terrible and that must mean it feels really horrible to you. So help me out. Tell me what I should do to make my lectures better."

They needed some time for it to sink in that I was serious. I waited in the quiet of the classroom, an auditorium that could seat two hundred and ten people.

"I'm serious," I said after a while. "I've never taught a class of 200 students. I've never taught in an auditorium. Help me... give me some suggestions."

I waited until...

"Don't repeat so much..."

"But I want to make sure you get the important points down in your notes."

"Well that parts good... but, if you go slow, we've got it after a couple of repeats. After that it's annoying."

"Give more everyday examples... sometimes you are too abstract..."

"Sometimes you're a little stiff... don't be so formal all the time..."

Teaching is one of the things a college professor does. It is not, however, something to be taken for granted.

On the day I stopped lecturing in my introduction to psychology course, I learned from my students. I learned what they pay attention to, which isn't just the information, or how interesting is the information itself. Students pay attention to what you are trying to do; are you really trying to teach? Students pay attention to the professor as a person; who is he or she?, what does he like?, would it be cool to have a conversation with this person? And all that irrelevant stuff isn't irrelevant at all because it shapes what and how much the student gets from a lecture and the course.

Chosen as a Danforth Fellow for my potential to become an outstanding college teacher, time had been sporadic during graduate school to develop a set of teaching principles. At the University of Michigan, on my first postdoctoral appointment, I set myself on fire while I focused on honing my skills as a researcher. Returning to UNC-Chapel Hill, my ideas about teaching were growing and some were harvested and put into my academic gumbo. There during my second postdoctoral experience, when my wife left me and John Thibaut died, I continued my research and I worked deliberately on developing my teaching skills. I taught. I developed a new course; "The Social Psychology of Work." Standing in for Dr. Thibaut I taught my first graduate level course. At Auburn I taught social psychology at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In those courses in particular I realized the connection between my group facilitation skills and teaching, and so began to develop my active-engagement teaching style. I would go at the students; sometimes it was a frontal attack, sometimes a sneak attack. Even so it was always an attack based on the knowledge established through the science of social psychology. Yet even with that as the foundation, it was still a shock to the students. That is why it became my tradition that on the last day of my social psychology class I delivered a thank you to the class that was,

> "thank you for not being intimidated when I jumped you. I meant to jump you. I did so to make you find a new way to think about certain matters. Thanks for holding on and hanging in there."

Students in my class always got a kick out of that thank you. They smiled as they remembered the times I jumped them.

All that being true it was not until I was teaching at North Carolina State University that I encountered my true teaching challenge. The course was "Introduction to Psychology," a survey of the entire field, taught in an auditorium filled with 200 Freshmen and Sophomores. And the mere number of students did matter because the number changed the requirements of teaching, and at first tightened me up, made me more formal. In this course, and in this setting, I would have to teach on topics that I knew very little about and still find a way to make each topic interesting to the students. So it was the simmering heat of teaching introduction to Psychology at North Carolina

State University that subtly bonded the flavor of my teaching goals and ideas into the taste of my professional gumbo.

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Using the doorway on the left, I walked into room 216 of Poe Hall, looked up into a sea of 200 faces, crossed to the center of the room, kept walking and exited through the doors on the far right of the room. My heart was racing, my breathing too fast. I had panicked. How was I supposed to connect with those very real 200 students in the auditorium waiting for me? I walked to the water fountain, drank, went back into the auditorium and started class, my heart still racing, my breathing still too fast.

No, this was not my first time in that classroom. Before the semester began I had gone in, more than once, to feel the room, to become acquainted and comfortable with its size. And no, this was not the largest audience of students I had ever taught. At Auburn University I had done a guest lecture on social psychology to an introductory psychology class of 300 students.

Yet I was unprepared for the power of the presence of 200 students who it would be my responsibility to teach for fifteen weeks. Every word I would say would be "the truth," even for those topics I knew nothing about. On that first day, when I walked in, all I could see and hear was the noise of a 200 person beginning band, with 200 novices playing in different keys, the instruments of their out of tune interest. My job would be to tune and orchestrate the interest of each instrument holder, finding some way to create a harmonic of attention and learning.

I got some help. I sought out two master conductors.

Two of my new colleagues, Jim Kalat and Bob Pond, offered to meet with me periodically to talk about teaching the intro course. Both had been teaching the course for years, both had been named to the Academy of Outstanding Teachers. So, every now and then, we three met over lunch, and I talked about my moments of panic, experimentation, failure and triumph. They responded with sympathy, their own stories of their beginning attempts, and strategies that worked for them. From those discussions, talking to my students, drawing on my background in group facilitation, I began to develop a set of teaching principles. A few years later, by the time I was nominated by

students and elected by my colleagues into the Academy of Outstanding Teachers, I was able to spell out my seven principles for orchestrating the interest of students.

Especially in classes with large numbers of students, the basic complaint from students is that learning is passive and impersonal; the professor talks, the students take notes. My attempts to bridge that gap, my failures and successes, led me to the discovery of a teaching structure that works in any college classroom, regardless of class size. Those seven principles are about what it takes to make the large classroom experience more dynamic; to more fully engage students.

Principle 1: *Violate expectations*. Do something that says, "hello out there, this is a real person up here." For example, on the first day of Introduction to Psychology I send in my teaching assistant (a graduate student) to start the class with a tape- recorded message from me. This gets the students' attention.

Principle 2: *Set a pattern for social interaction in the classroom*. I come in to the classroom only a minute or so before class. I set up my podium. Then I walk out of the classroom. When I return, I close the doors and everyone knows class is about to begin. I come up to the podium, and with my rousing loud voice say "Good afternoon" and I wait for a hearty return of greeting from them. Then I say something like "Today we turn our attention to..." or "You will recall that we have been discussing..." That way the beginning is always the same, with a cordial but businesslike air. I never have to say "ok let's settle down so we can get started" because students know when the classroom social interaction begins; there is never any doubt about this.

Principle 3: *Assume that the students are engaged by your lecture; that they are really listening.* Why? I do this so that I, the instructor, will act as if I am having a conversation with an interested listener. That assumption motivates me to (a) look them in the eyes, (b) expect intelligent questions, and (c) communicate the expectation that all of the students in the class are listening.

Principle 4: *Make the material relevant to their lives, not just relevant to the discipline from which the theories come.* In Introduction to Psychology one of the first topics is the role of the brain in human behavior. Typically freshmen and sophomores find this to be a tedious topic; neurons, action potentials, hemispheres, lobes, Corpus Callosum. To orchestrate their attention on this topic, instead of lecturing on the details of the structure

and mechanics of the brain, I ask questions: How many have ever ridden a bicycle, skateboard, motorcycle, without wearing a helmet? How many have ever been so drunk or high that the next day you couldn't remember what happened the night before? After they have answered these questions (with a show of hands or to themselves), I tell them that being hit on the head or being that drunk can lead to a loss of brain cells and brain damage, and yet they might not know of the damage. "But," I say... and then I tell them about the "unrecovery process," which is that any loss of brain cells leads to some physical problem either right away or years later. "You see," I say, long after recovery from a (known or unknown) brain injury a person may "unrecover." That means that symptoms of early brain damage may not show up right away but appear later in life.

Oh, oh...

Now I have them. You can feel the sense of dread in the room. Why? Because since they have engaged in one or more of the risky behaviors, they are thinking "oh shit... what's going to happen to me later." And they are wondering "so how does this work?" They want to know how this brain damage and unrecovery happens. To figure that out they need to know how the brain works. And now, because it is relevant to their everyday lives, they are motivated to listen and learn about neurons, action potentials, lobes and such.

Principle 5: *Show how work in the discipline can help to organize students' experiences*. In all of my courses, one of the techniques I sometimes use begins with having students express their opinions on some topic. I write on the board whatever they say. But I write down what they say in unlabelled columns. After they have exhausted everything they want to bring up I show how everything they have said fits into certain scientific categories. I do this, for example, to set up my lecture entitled "Fighting to Stay In a Burning House: Why People Stay in Destructive Relationships." After defining "destructive relationship" and giving examples, I then ask the class why they think people cling to those relationships. The class gives a lot of answers and I put those answers into three unlabelled columns that I know reflect social psychological categories. I then make those categories explicit as I move through three scientific explanations for why a person might stay in an abusive relationship. Students have an "oh really" kind of response to seeing that their ideas can be captured by a scientific approach.

Principle 6: *Be provocative: Make an argument (based on what is known) that students will disagree with and then watch them try to convince you that you are wrong, and then demonstrate why and how it is that your position is defensible.* Students come into Introduction to Psychology with an unfailing belief in the idea of personality; that each individual has a unique and consistent way of being in the world that is due to something in the internal make up of that person. So after we have been discussing "life span development" I make a point of asking if the class agrees with the claim that from birth to death people continually grow and change. They agree because we have just talked about stages of cognitive development and stages of social development. After the class has agreed (as they always do) that individuals continue to grow and change, I then ask the class if they believe in the idea of personality. They always say yes. So then I say,

"Well maybe it's me but don't those two things contradict each other. On the one hand you say individuals continue to grow and change over their lives and on the other hand you say individuals show consistent ways of behaving that cuts across all situations and even across time (their age)."

I say trenchantly that both those things cannot be true.

There is always a stunned silence from the class of 200. They see the problem. They feel trapped, even tricked (a few have said). I wait... then hands go up and the battle is joined.

I let a student make their argument, and then I come back with a counterpoint and contradictory evidence; another hand and comment, another counter argument from me. This whole class period is electric. Hands are up all over the auditorium. Students who have said nothing all semester have their hands in the air and are trying to shout me down.

Finally I become more systematic and give them my "four things the scientist must believe, in order to study personality." The students get to ask questions and make comments about these six things. At the end of this class period I have had students come up to me and shake my hand; "that was a hell of a class," they say; all because I have been provocative. I have made a strong, logical, scientific case against something they believe in and I have let them try to shoot me down.

Principle 7: *Use whatever personal resources you have; talents and skills.* A 6'3" 250 lb. black man, I have a big presence; Darth Vader voice, physical stature. I use all that when I teach. In the course of a lecture I sometimes play a piece of music; dramatically recite a poem; sing. When I make one of my provocative arguments and students argue against my position, I raise my voice; I walk towards the current speaker. Why? To say, I am serious... come on, bring it, let me hear it, let me feel it.

Why do all this work? For me the answer is because the classroom is likely to be my only chance to influence the thinking of the citizenry. It is a valuable opportunity to add something to that gumbo. For me this is not just teaching. This is teaching as revolution.

We are not come to wage a strife
With swords upon this hill,
It is not wise to waste the life
Against a stubborn will.
Yet would we die as some have done.
Beating a way for the rising sun.

Arna Bontemps
The Day-Breakers