

Thirty-Five Years Professing Psychology: Lessons I Have Learned

Dialogue invited David Myers to update some reflections he first presented in 1992.

By David Myers

Having recently completed three and a half decades professing psychology and having just turned 60 years of age, this seems a fitting time to reflect again on some lessons I have learned. Perhaps this self-disclosure can stimulate some of you to reflect on the lessons you have learned while professing psychology. Can you articulate what Bob Sternberg calls your "tacit knowledge"—the implicit, experienced-based principles that facilitate your work life? Here are a dozen lessons I have learned.

Lesson #1: One can't predict the future. As an undergraduate chemistry major who had taken only introductory psychology during my first three years, I would never have guessed that I'd become a social psychologist. When entering graduate school, aiming to become a college teacher, I would never have guessed that I'd become engaged by research. And when doing research during my assistant professor years, I would never have guessed that I would become a writer.

The awakening of my interest in social psychological research illustrates why I have come to expect the unexpected. When I arrived to begin Iowa's graduate program in 1964, having declared my interest in personality, my advisor explained that their one faculty member in personality had just left. "So we've put you in social psychology." And that is how I became a social psychologist.

During my second year, I assisted social psychologist Sidney Aronson by engaging 40 small groups in discussing story problems that assessed risk-

taking. We replicated the phenomenon of increased risk taking by groups, dubbed the "risky shift," and before long the college teacher wanna-be had, to his surprise, also become a research psychologist. Moreover, the research mutated unpredictably—from risky shift to a broader group polarization phenomenon to studies of the subtle influence of mere exposure to others' opinions.

Such is the adventure of life. You can't know your future. Your interests on entering college will likely change during college, and will change again during your working life. And that is why a broad education for an unpredictable future—a liberal education—serves most students better than a focused vocational education.

Lesson #2: Contrarian professional investment can pay big dividends. Major contributions often occur when people invest in a research problem at an early stage—when, as Bob Sternberg says, the intellectual stock is still undervalued. Unless one is uncommonly brilliant, which most of us aren't, a good way to contribute to psychology is to pick a research problem that has hardly been studied. This offers the chance to master the available literature before it proceeds to third-order interaction effects. Then stay with the stock. Become a world-class expert. The risky shift/group polarization literature was visited by dozens of people who dabbled with a study or two and then moved on to do a study or two in other areas. The people who really enlarged our understanding were not these, but those who stayed around long enough to dive deep, often by offering a single idea which they pushed to its limits.

Lesson #3: Scholarship can be a lonely enterprise. When you have freshly mastered a literature and know

it about as well as anyone in the world, few other people may know or care. Once you have done your research, written it up, survived the publication lag, had your work cited in secondary sources, and gone on to other things, then people will take you to be an expert and will invite you to give talks and write reflective chapters. Meanwhile, the fresh minds working at the cutting edge will be languishing for such opportunities.

Lesson #4: Success, even if serendipitous, builds on itself. Life isn't fair. Success biases new opportunities toward those who've already been given other opportunities. Although the skills required for research and for writing overlap only modestly, it was my good fortune to happen onto what turned out to be a fruitful research problem (rather than a dead end) that led to an invitation to write my social psychology text . . . which led to an invitation to write an introductory psychology text . . . which lent credibility to my approach to a literary agent about writing *The Pursuit of Happiness* . . . which opened doors for other opportunities to communicate psychological science to the lay public. Although the process begins with solitary hard work, fortunate outcomes can lead to more opportunities, whether one is the most deserving person or not. Success feeds on itself. So it pays to start well.

Lesson #5: To be an effective, contributing professional one needn't be uncommonly brilliant or creative. With dogged work, I was able to master a literature and connect some dots, despite not having the genius to invent the theories. One needn't be as theoretically creative as Daniel Kahneman to work at winnowing truth from falsehood, at consolidating what we've learned, or at communicating it

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to college students and the lay public. That's what Dean Simonton has discerned from the curvilinear relationship between intelligence and leadership ability. Up to a point, intelligence facilitates leadership. But an excessive intellectual gap between leader and follower can hamper their communication. Good teaching and science writing likewise require enough intelligence to comprehend what the pioneering theorists are saying and discovering, but not so much that one is out of touch with how ordinary people think and talk.

If one isn't brilliant or expert on every aspect of a problem, it also helps to gain the support of people whose competencies complement your own. I suspect every text author has at times felt mildly embarrassed by people who are too impressed—people who think we just sat down and wrote what they're reading, assuming they never could. But such folks should not be so intimidated. It actually took a whole team of reviewers and editors to shape, over several drafts, a work that surpasses what the author, working alone, was capable of writing.

Lesson #6: You don't get pellets unless you bar press. Life has us on partial reinforcement schedules. What one reviewer thinks is pointless research, another will think is pioneering. What one reader finds "too cute," another will find refreshingly witty. The poet Pennington was once rejected by a magazine which explained, "This is the worst poem in the English language. You are the worst poet in the English language." So he sent the poem to another magazine, which accepted it "with glowing praise," and chose it as its year's best poem.

Given the unreliability of others' judgments of our work, it pays to try and try again. Our colleagues who are athletic coaches live with the publicity given both their victories and their

defeats. Those of us who are scholars only announce our victories. But let me admit to one of my strings of unpublicized defeats. Several years ago, *Today's Education* rejected my critique of the labeling and segregation of "gifted" children from the 95 percent of children deemed, by implication, "ungifted." I then submitted it to six other periodicals, all of which rejected it. Noticing that *Today's Education* by now had a new editor, and thinking the piece slightly improved, I resubmitted it to *Today's Education* without reminding them that they already had rejected a previous draft. They accepted it immediately, published it, later gave permission for its reprinting in newspapers and magazines, and invited me to write more.

Lesson #7: If you feel excited by an idea or a possibility, don't be easily deterred by criticism. We've all heard stories of great books that were rejected countless times before publication, or works of art or music that went unappreciated during the creator's lifetime. People derided Robert Fulton's steamboat as "Fulton's Folly." As Fulton later said, "Never did a single encouraging remark, a bright hope, a warm wish, cross my path." Much the same reaction greeted the printing press, the telegraph, the incandescent lamp, and the typewriter. John White's book, *Rejection*, is one story after another of all the scorn and derision that greeted the work of people from Michelangelo and Beethoven to the American poet A. Wilber Stevens, who received from his hoped-for publisher an envelope of ashes. Dr. Seuss initially was rejected by some two dozen publishers. "There is no way to sell a book about an unknown Dutch painter," Doubleday explained before Irving Stone's book about Van Gogh survived 15 rejections and sold 25 million copies. In a possibly apocryphal story, one of the seven publishers that rejected *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* said that the tale "smelled like rotting carrots."

If you pick up brochures for anyone's textbook and read all the nice quotes,

you may feel a twinge of envy, thinking it must be nice to get all those glowing reviews. But those aren't all the reviews. Let me tell you about some reviews that you will never see quoted. A reviewer of my introductory psychology text offered the following in his chapter reviews: *The use of the English language in this book is atrocious. Faulty grammar and syntax, imprecise meaning and incorrect terminology etc. etc. are abundant. When I'm reading the book I have the feeling that it is written by one of my undergraduate students; when reviewing this edition it is at times like correcting an undergraduate term paper.*

In response to another chapter he wrote that: *I find the tone and even content paternalistic, value laden and maybe even demeaning. Especially the section on "work" is very poor; it left me angry that one would want to present such "crap" to learning young adults. Did Dr. Myers really write this vague, stereotypical, poorly worded, unclear and confusing section on work?*

And to yet another chapter: *At times this text reads as if it has been a translation from the German language.* (Incredibly, this reviewer shortly thereafter adopted the book!)

Then there was the reviewer who noted that the book "is very biased and opinionated. I don't think the author is very competent. I have thought of writing a text and perhaps now moreso," whereupon he proceeded to offer his services.

While preparing that book's first edition, there were days when, after being hammered on by editors—one of whom scribbled criticism all over several chapters with but *one* still-remembered compliment: "nice simile"—I longed for a single encouraging word. One of my most difficult professional tasks—perhaps yours, too, as you cope with mentors' criticisms, professional reviews, or student evaluations—is being open to feedback without feeling defeated by it. The lesson I have learned from this is: Listen to criticism, but if you have a

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vision, hold to it. Keep your eye on the goal. In retrospect, I'm glad I submitted to the process, but I'm also glad I didn't let it intimidate me into submission.

Lesson #8: As praise and criticism accumulates, its power to elate or depress lessens. Compliments provoke less elation and criticisms less despair as both become mere lotas of additional feedback atop a pile of accumulated praise and reproach. That helps explain why emotions mellow as we age. I have spent hours in sleepless anguish over my children's ups and downs, but rarely, of late, over professional criticism. As Albert Ellis keeps reminding people, not everyone is going to love what we do. The more feedback I receive, the more I can accept that.

Lesson #9: Achievement comes with keeping focused. Our basketball coaches say their teams play well when they keep their focus, without being distracted from their game plan by the referees' calls, the opposing fans, or the other team's spurts. A successful entrepreneur friend speaks of achieving success by keeping his focus—knowing his niche, where he's needed, what he's good at. We all get asked to do all sorts of things that other people can do as well or better. My experience is that the world is a better place when each of us identifies and then focuses on our best gifts. When a service club wants a talk on a topic where I have no expertise, or when a caller needs a counselor, I decline, with thanks, or offer a referral, remembering that every time I say "yes" to something I am implicitly saying "no" to some other use of that time. Sometimes I want to say yes to that use of time, which is what led me to spend time preparing these reflections. Other times, the alternative uses of the time feel like higher priorities.

And when my house needed repair work, I tried, even when supporting a

family solely on an assistant professor income, to emulate my father, who would pay craftspeople to do what they could do better and more efficiently, which gave them work and freed his time for his profession. In the long run, it has paid off. I'm not advocating a workaholicism that competes with investing in family relationships, relaxing hobbies, and an equitable sharing of daily domestic work. But if I can focus all those other hours on the professional work that I most enjoy, I'll have more to give. It's a point I make to younger colleagues when I see them doing clerical work, which both deprives someone else of a job and steals time from their own profession.

Also, though some people seem to manage several professional tasks at once, I must be slower-witted. I am most effective when focused on one project. A little song from *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, a film about St. Francis of Assisi, says it well:

If you want your dream to be,
build it slow and surely.
Do few things, but do them well,
heartfelt work goes purely.

Lesson #10: Success requires enough optimism to provide hope and enough pessimism to prevent complacency. Feeling capable of but one task at a time partly reflects a nagging lack of self-confidence, the sort of "defensive pessimism" that, ironically, can enable success—when it goads us to believe that only by utter diligence will we ever do work on a par with that done by all those more brilliant people at more famous places. It was because I knew I *wasn't* a gifted writer (my worst college grade was in a writing class) that I focused on developing my writing skills—by reading great writers such as C. S. Lewis and Carl Sagan; by studying style manuals such as Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, Jacques Barzun's *Simple and Direct*, and William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*; by subjecting my writing to a computer grammar checker; and, especially, by engaging a writing coach—a poet colleague who has closely edited some 5,000 of my manuscript pages while

patiently teaching me what it means to develop a voice, to order words to maximize punch, to write with rhythm. It pays to have enough self-confidence to risk undertaking a project, and enough self-doubt to think you'll fail if you don't focus enormous effort on it.

Lesson #11: To minimize stress and maximize productivity, it pays to manage time. Several years ago I noticed one of my colleagues writing down something in his desk calendar as someone left his office. What was he doing? He was logging his time, he explained, to see how closely his use of time mirrored his espoused priorities. So I decided to do the same. What a revelation! Not only did I learn how long it took me to write a textbook—3550 hours for the first edition of *Social Psychology*—I learned how poorly my actual priorities matched my proclaimed priorities. More minutes adding up to more hours than I would have believed were frittered away uselessly—not counseling students, not teaching, not doing research or writing, not in meetings, just doing nothing useful.

While still allowing time for spontaneous connections with people, that very realization made me more conscious of wasted time. I took to always having a pen and note card in my pocket, or something to read in my briefcase, so that unexpected minutes waiting for the dentist or for a late plane could be put to use. Noting that it took emotional energy to gear up for class and to descend after class, I bunched my classes together into Tuesdays and Thursdays—leaving the other days emotionally freer to concentrate on research and writing. Having multiple preparations of the same course—teaching all social psychology one semester, all introductory psychology another, if possible—further reduced the work load without compromising the teaching load.

Another time management strategy is to set big goals, then break them down into weekly objectives. Before

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beginning work on a new textbook, I would lay out a week by week schedule. My goal was not to have the whole 600 page book done by such and such date; that's too remote and formidable. But writing three manuscript pages a day is a relative cuppa tea. Repeat the process 400 times and, presto!, you have a 1,200 page manuscript. It's really not so hard, nor is reaching many goals when attacked day by day. (Although we often overestimate how much we will accomplish in any given day, we generally *underestimate* how much we can accomplish in a year, given just a little progress every day.) Moreover, as each mini-deadline is met one gets the delicious, confident feeling of personal control.

Lesson # 12: Professing psychology is a wonderful vocation. What more fascinating subject could we study and teach than our own human workings? What teaching aims are more worthy than restraining intuition with critical thinking and judgmentalism with understanding? What subject is more influential in shaping values and lifestyles than our young science of psychology? There are "two sorts of jobs," wrote C. S. Lewis in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*:

Of one sort, a [person] can truly say, "I am doing work which is worth doing. It would still be worth doing if nobody paid for it. But as I have no private means, and need to be fed and housed and clothed, I must be paid while I do it." The other kind of job is that in which people do work whose sole purpose is the earning of money: work which need not be, ought not to be, or would not be, done by anyone in the whole world unless it were paid.

I am thankful that I am blessed with a vocation that is decidedly in the first category. A vocation that is mind-expanding, full of fresh surprises, and focused on humanly significant questions. ■