Passionate Teaching and Lessons Learned

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Having recently completed three-and-a-half decades professing psychology and having passed sixty years of age, I see this as 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, and hopefully those students who are just beginning their career journey. These “lessons” can perhaps be best articulated by what Bob Sternberg (i.e., Robert Sternberg, Ph.D., professor, Yale University) calls your “tacit knowledge”—the implicit, experienced-based principles that facilitate your work life.

CAREER AND LIFE LESSONS

Lesson 1: One Cannot Predict the Future

As an undergraduate chemistry major who had taken only introductory psychology during my first three years, I never would have guessed that I would become a social psychologist. When entering graduate school, aiming to become a college teacher, I never would have guessed that I would become engaged by research. When doing research during my assistant professor years, I never would 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 the department’s one faculty member in personality had just left. “So we’ve put you in social psychology”—that is how I became a social psychologist.

During my second year, I assisted social psychologist Sidney Aronson by engaging forty 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 this 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 on attitudes of mere exposure to others’ attitudes.
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 you are uncommonly brilliant, which most of us are not, a good way to contribute to psychology is to pick a research problem that has received little study. This strategy 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 researchers, but those who stayed around long enough to dive deep, often by offering a single idea that they pushed to its limits.

Lesson 3: Scholarship Can Be a Lonely Enterprise

When you have freshly mastered a literature topic and know it about as well as anyone in the world, few other people may know or care. Unless one is working on a team project, to be a scholar is often to feel alone and ignored. Once we have done our research, written it up, endured the publication lag, had our work cited in secondary sources, and gone on to other things, then people will take us to be experts and may invite us 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 is not fair. Success biases new opportunities toward those who have 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 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 (1993), 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 you are 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 Need Not Be Uncommonly Brilliant or Creative

With dogged work, I was able to master a literature topic and connect some dots, despite not having the genius to invent the theories. You need not be as theoretically creative as Nobel Laureate cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman to work at winnowing truth from falsehood, at consolidating what we have learned, or at communicating it to college students and the lay public. That is what Dean Simonton (1994) has discerned from the curvilinear relationship between intelligence and leadership ability. Up to a point, intelligence facilitates leadership. However, 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 you are not 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 are reading, assuming they never could. 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 Do Not Get Pellets Unless You Press the Bar

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 that 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. However, 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 had already 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, Do Not Be Deterred by Criticism**

We have 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* (1982) 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. Remember, Dr. Seuss was initially 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 (1963) survived fifteen rejections and reportedly 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 quotations, you may feel a twinge of envy, thinking it must be nice to get all those glowing reviews—those are not all the reviews. Let me tell you about some reviews that you will never see quoted. One long-retired 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?

Yet another chapter: “At times this text reads as if it has been a translation from the German language.” (Incredibly, this reviewer, who also had helpful suggestions, 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 more so,” 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 this: Listen to criticism, but if you have a vision, hold to it. Keep your eye on the goal. In retrospect, I am glad I submitted to the process, but I am also glad I did not let it intimidate me into submission.

Lesson 8: As Praise and Criticism Accumulate, Their Power to Elate or Depress Lessen

Compliments provoke less elation, and criticisms less despair, as both become mere iotas 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 (i.e, Albert Ellis, Ph.D., pioneer of rational-emotive therapy) 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 and Managing Time

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 is needed, what he is 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.

When my house needed repair work, I tried, even when supporting a family solely on an assistant professor’s 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 am not advocating a workaholism that competes with investing in family relationships, relaxing hobbies, and an equitable sharing of daily domestic work; if I can focus all those other hours on the professional work that I most enjoy, I will have more to give. It is 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.

Time management also pays dividends. 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. I decided to do the same.

What a revelation! Not only did I learn how long it took me to write a textbook—3,550 hours for the first edition of *Social Psychology*—but also 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.

Another time management strategy is to set big goals, then break them down into weekly objectives. Before 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 is 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 is 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 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 was not 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* (2000), Jacques Barzun’s *Simple and Direct* (2001), and William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well* (2001); 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 will fail if you do not focus enormous effort on it.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHING**

Each of these lessons, born of experience, have implications for teachers and teaching.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 1**

*The future’s unpredictability provides a rationale for liberal education.* You cannot know your future, I explain to new and prospective students—“Your interests on entering college will likely change during college, and change again during your working life.” Most students end up majoring in something they did not have in mind on entering college, and end up in a vocation unrelated to their major. That is why a broad education for an unpredictable future—a liberal education—serves most students better than a purely vocational education.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 2**

*Contrarian investment* sometimes pays dividends, not only when placed in undervalued financial and intellectual stocks, but also in undervalued or undeveloped students. We teachers take joy in spotting and encouraging
potential talent in students whose minds are just now awakening to the world of learning. I came to college with an above average but undistinguished high school record and interests that barely ranged beyond sports, salmon fishing, and the family business. But thanks in part to Whitworth College faculty that opened my mind to interesting ideas and encouraged me to believe in my own potential, my interests expanded and, much to my surprise, four years later I found myself in graduate school.

Teaching Implication for Lesson 3

*Teaching, like scholarship, can be a lonely enterprise.* “When preparing classes and facing students we’re usually on our own.” My college has responded to this reality with a week-long August “teaching enhancement” workshop for new faculty. Not only are they exposed to some effective teaching strategies, they gain a senior faculty mentor (who plays no part in assessing them for tenure), and they immediately gain a support group of friends who are part of their pledge class of newcomers.

Teaching Implication for Lesson 4

*Teaching success, like scholarly success, feeds on itself.* With success comes increased comfort and confidence, which breeds further success, which builds one’s reputation, which heightens students’ expectations as they enter your class. Students often begin courses having heard “Professor Smith is interesting” and “Professor Jones is a bore.” Robert Feldman (Feldman & Prohaska, 1979; Feldman & Theiss, 1982) found that such expectations can affect both student and teacher. Students in a learning experiment who expected to be taught by a competent teacher perceived their teacher (who was unaware of their expectations) as more competent and interesting than did students with low expectations. Furthermore, the students actually learned more. In a follow-up experiment, Feldman and Prohaska videotaped teachers and had observers later rate their performance. Teachers were judged most capable when assigned a student who nonverbally conveyed positive expectations.

To see whether such effects might also occur in actual classrooms, a research team led by David Jamieson (1987) experimented with four Ontario high school classes taught by a newly transferred teacher. During individual interviews they told students in two of the classes that both other students and the research team rated the teacher very highly. Compared to the control classes, the students given positive expectations paid better attention during class. At the end of the teaching unit, they also got better grades and rated the teacher as clearer in her teaching. The attitudes that a class has toward its
teacher are as important, it seems, as the teacher’s attitude toward the students.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 5**

*Effectiveness does not require uncommon brilliance or creativity.* Some of our colleagues have the genius to invent great ideas and do pioneering research. If others of us lack the smarts or resources to match their intellectual accomplishments, we may nonetheless be smart enough to take the bread that’s baking up in the ivory towers and bring it down to the street where folks can eat it. Moreover, some of us may have gifts of warmth, enthusiasm, and passion for teaching that enable us to communicate psychology more effectively than can our most distinguished psychological scientists. Many leading scientists understand this and therefore appreciate those who effectively give their work away to the public.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 6**

*Teachers, too, get partial reinforcement for bar pressing.* Some demonstrations, some jokes, some media, some lectures, some discussion topics flop. Others really work! The point is effectively made. Students are engaged and participating. As we try new activities and get reinforced for the things that do work, our courses gradually mutate to greater and greater effectiveness (assuming we maintain our freshness and enthusiasm).

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 7**

*Great teachers are informed but not deflated by criticism.* Feedback—the more specific, the better—is part of the process by which students reinforce and strengthen what we do well, and inform us of what needs redoing. Even very good teachers get wounded by stinging criticism from a few anonymous students. And so do all of us. Here, from my files, is an example from one student’s end-of-course evaluation:

What did you find beneficial about this course:

“Nothing.”

If you think that the course could be improved, what would you suggest:

“End the course.”

What advice would you give to a friend who is planning to take this course?

“Don’t.”
Because we hold such comments to ourselves, we may be unaware that our esteemed colleagues occasionally get similarly stung.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 8**

*As student feedback accumulates, its power to elate or depress wanes.* If the nasty feedback above had been in response to my first teaching effort, I might have contemplated my father’s invitation to come home to Seattle to join the family insurance agency. Coming after many semesters of teaching, after receiving feedback from many hundreds of students, a single statement of praise (“this is the best class and best teacher I have ever had”) still feels good, and a single hostile statement (“the course was dull and the tests unfair”) still feels bad. But one’s head doesn’t swell over the former (we know not all students responded so warmly), nor does the sting of a single criticism cause a sleepless night.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 9**

*Teaching success comes with focus and time management.* It comes with identifying and harnessing our gifts (are we especially good at lecturing? facilitating discussion? engaging students with activities and media?). And it comes with teaching multiple sections of a few courses (as opposed to single sections of many courses). 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 sections of the same course—teaching, if possible, all my social psychology sections one semester, all my introductory psychology sections another—further reduced the work load without compromising the teaching load. By clustering our year’s sections of a given course in one semester, we reduce the number of preparations (and of sets of lectures, exams, media hassles, and trips to the Xerox machine) in any one semester.

**Teaching Implication for Lesson 10**

*Teaching success grows from a mix of confidence-enabling optimism and defensive pessimism.* To feel comfortable and in command of our material and presentation, we’ve got to believe in our competence and teaching skill. Yet a dash of anxiety both motivates preparation and lends a certain edge. Just before meeting my first class of the day I would always find my autonomic nervous system requiring a last-minute visit to the bathroom (a phenomenon that other colleagues experience as well). That pre-class arousal is part of the edge, the energy, the enthusiasm that enables our best teaching.