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[Introduction to] The Professor's Guide to Teaching: Psychological Principles and Practices

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The Professor's Guide to
Teaching

**Psychological Principles
and Practices**

Donelson R. Forsyth

American Psychological Association
Washington, DC

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back.

—Mitch Albom
Tuesdays With Morrie (1997, p. 192)

Psychologists are not only researchers, statisticians, therapists, and consultants but also teachers who promote the dissemination of the field's stock of knowledge, skills, and outlook to others. Like their colleagues in other departments and programs, psychology professors must deal with issues related to learning and instruction, such as lecturing, testing, grading, and evaluating instruction, but unlike professors in other disciplines, they approach these issues informed by their broad understanding of psychological theory and research. Because the processes that are involved in teaching and learning are the very processes studied by psychologists, when psychologists teach, they can take advantage of the same knowledge, skills, and abilities that they use in their other professional roles as theoretical scientists, researchers, and practitioners.

* * *

Many psychologists are scientists who test hypotheses about the causes and consequences of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. Others are therapists and consultants who use their skills to improve clients' adjustment and promote well-being. But some psychologists are teachers: professors who promote the dissemination of the field's stock of knowledge, skills, and outlook to other professionals, students, and the lay community. They teach in small liberal arts colleges and huge universities; they teach inveterate doctoral students, disdainful upper-level majors, enthusiastic first-year students, and distracted high school students. These professors are full-time members of the faculty who balance their teaching against their

research and service duties, adjunct faculty who help their department meet its need for teachers, and part-timers who return to campus when their work schedules permit. Some remember teaching in a world without computers, e-mail, and “Student Evaluations of Teaching” forms, but others are graduate students standing at the lectern of their first classroom unshuffled by all but the most vicarious of preparation for their professorial obligations.

These teaching psychologists are similar in many ways to professors in other disciplines within the academy. Like colleagues in such departments as English, chemistry, foreign languages, management, sculpture, or music, they must achieve an extraordinary degree of mastery over their chosen field. College professors are not just teachers who summarize the work of others for students but are scholars who share their unique and penetrating understanding of their field through teaching. All professors, too, are the experimenters delivering the manipulation in one of the most elaborate social programs ever devised: higher education. They share the goals described so eloquently by Cardinal Newman in 1852, including “raising the intellectual tone of society,” “cultivating the public mind,” “purifying the national taste,” “giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age,” “facilitating the exercise of political power,” and “refining the intercourse of private life” (Newman, 1852/1973). All, too, are members of the community of scholars who teach, study, and sustain their disciplines and their universities through their service.

But teaching psychologists, *qua* psychologists, differ from professors in other disciplines within the academy in a fundamental way: They command a profound understanding of psychological, behavioral, and interpersonal processes that influence their teaching and their students’ learning. Whereas chemistry professors may wonder why their students are not motivated to learn the material they present in lecture, psychologists can call to mind a dozen explanations of students’ indifference—and use those theories and the research that they have generated to identify ways to ignite students’ interest in their studies. Although engineering professors may be convinced that experiential activities enhance learning, psychologists can draw on emerging studies of memory, cognition, and learning to test and refine this assumption. Whereas professors of music may not understand the difference between a test’s reliability and a test’s validity, psychologists do—they invented these concepts. When psychologists teach, their efforts are informed not only by their personal experiences but also by the stock of knowledge of their entire discipline.

The role of teacher is also consistent, in many respects, with the other roles that comprise the psychologist’s professional persona, including scientist, researcher, and practitioner. As scientists, psychologists are skilled builders of theories, synthesizers of empirical findings, and perspicacious critics who can find conceptual weaknesses in even the tightest conceptual

argument. These skills not only help them generate new understandings of psychological processes but also provide them with the means of organizing and communicating that understanding to others. As researchers with data collection and analysis skills honed through years of practice, psychologists approach questions of measurement, assessment, and classification with confidence rather than confusion. Psychologists' applied skills—their knowledge of the symptoms of dysfunction, their familiarity with conflict and its resolution, their commitment to prosocial values, and their helping skills—are as useful in the classroom as they are in the clinic, counseling center, and community.

Because teaching psychologists command a profound understanding of the causes of human thought, emotion, and action, their instructional methods, their examinations, their one-on-one tutorials, and even the support they give their students should be the envy of professors in other academic disciplines. Yet, in too many cases, psychologists do not exploit their discipline's resources when they teach. Some, when teaching 300 students in an auditorium, use the same procedures as the chemistry professor down the hall. Others give their students tests that include mostly multiple-choice items that ask about facts and information. Some never require that their students write any papers, ask questions in class, or take part in discussion. And some, when they get the feedback from the previous term's teacher evaluations, remark that "the quality of teaching cannot be measured." Some professors spend all their time looking at their students through the eyes of a teacher rather than through the eyes of a psychologist.

But what insights does psychology offer to the professor in the classroom? This book offers a partial answer to this question by breaking college-level teaching down into its behavioral components. It begins at the beginning, with the steps that the professor takes when planning a course, and ends, as it should, at the ending: documenting one's contributions in teaching by developing a teaching portfolio. Each chapter frames the major issues surrounding one aspect of instruction and then offers an overall conceptualization of these issues that draws on current psychological theory and research. The chapter dealing with lecturing, for example, conceptualizes the lecturing method as a form of communication and then uses research dealing with persuasion processes to identify how this teaching method can be best used. Similarly, the chapter dealing with classroom testing approaches the issue from the standpoint of psychological assessment and so considers how testing requires the same care that psychologists use when developing questionnaires and inventories.

The book is ultimately practical, however. It reviews theory and research, but its primary focus is on application in the educational setting. The analysis of lecturing as a form of communication, for example, offers a series of recommendations for best practices in teaching that stresses the

importance of considering the source of the message, the nature of the message, and the characteristics of the receiver of the message. The chapter dealing with the development of classroom assessment methods reviews the fundamentals of test development and item analysis and offers recommendations for alternative means of assessment. The chapters are sequenced by a just-in-time heuristic, with topics reviewed in the order in which they demand the professor's attention during a typical term's teaching schedule. Although teaching is more than the sum of these parts, I consider in turn planning, lecturing, using student-centered teaching methods, leading discussions, using collaborative or experiential activities, testing, grading, helping students through feedback and guidance, managing classroom dynamics, using innovative technology, evaluating teaching effectiveness, and documenting one's contributions as a teacher.

This book assumes that you, the reader, are a psychologist—or, at least, someone who is familiar with the fundamental assumptions, controversies, data, and other key elements of the discipline's paradigm. This assumption lets the analysis step beyond general questions about curriculum, instruction, and learning to focus on specific questions pertaining to the psychological processes involved in teaching and learning. The book is not, however, aimed at any particular kind of psychologist—only those who teach. It therefore strives to satisfy the needs of readers who are only beginning their careers as well as those who have been teaching for many years. These two groups' interests are in some ways incompatible, for novice teachers are often searching for techniques that will miraculously change their ho-hum courses into scintillating intellectual masterpieces, whereas veterans seek insights into perennial problems that still nag them each time they teach a course. This book tries to satisfy both these demands by organizing specific suggestions for teaching within an overall conceptual framework that is consistent with existing psychological theories and concepts.

I hope psychologists will find these suggestions useful, but I recognize that this book's basic goal is a presumptuous one. The suggestions offered may not add much to what readers already know about teaching. Like so many self-help or how-to books, it may fail to deliver on its promise of fresh insight and wise counsel. True, people who read self-help books often express satisfaction with them, and some evidence has suggested that this satisfaction is related to actual improvement (Halliday, 1991). But self-help books can also mislead readers rather than help them by proffering simplistic solutions to complex problems; their recommendations are often at variance with current research findings; they raise expectations but not awareness; and they delude people into thinking that they will improve by following the simple formulas the author presents (Rosen, 1987). As Starker (1987) concluded, "Self-help titles, by and large, are repositories

of unproven, sometimes unprovable, advice on matters of considerable importance and complexity" (p. 453).

I tried to avoid these pitfalls by not oversimplifying the complexities of teaching or drawing conclusions that overstepped the limitations of the available data. For the most part, however, the implications of psychology for teaching were too plentiful rather than too few. Teaching and learning are extraordinarily complex behaviors, but psychologists' models, theories, and findings offer insight after insight into these processes. To some professors in the academy teaching and learning may seem mysterious and unpredictable, but to psychologists they are intriguing phenomena that fall squarely within our domain of expertise. Because the processes that sustain teaching and learning are the very processes studied by psychologists, the classroom is a veritable laboratory and clinic for the teaching psychologist.