

On Becoming a Teacher of Psychology

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Every interesting story begins with unremarkable details. Unremarkable, that is, until you know the end of story, at which point its first minute suddenly makes sense. The story of how I came to teach psychology is no different.

I was born and raised in Santa Clara, California, as the only child of Slavenka Kirigin, who emigrated from Croatia, and George Slavich, whose parents emigrated from Croatia. My parents owned and operated a hardware store at the time, so I basically grew up living every boy's dream. I mixed paint, cut glass, threaded pipe, and handled lumber. When those tasks were done, I stood and quietly observed my mother and father work hard to translate hardware sales into a better life.

These early experiences set the stage for what I thought would be a career in business. Like any good story, though, plot twists ensued. Stanford University turned out not to have an undergraduate business major, and my interest in economics—which I imagined as the next best thing—diminished while I was enrolled in an economics course. During that same quarter a friend persuaded me to take introductory psychology, and it was ultimately thanks to a series of captivating lectures by John Gabrieli that I realized I adored the social component of business, not its fiscal underpinning.

The immigrant spirit rarely leaves interesting opportunities unexamined, and it was in this vein that I aimed to experience all that Stanford had to offer. I began going to meetings of the personality study area, which Albert Bandura, Laura Carstensen, Ian Gotlib, James Gross, Leonard Horowitz, and Jeanne Tsai regularly attended, and I served as a teaching assistant for a handful of professors, including John Flavell, Lee Ross, Claude Steele, and Phil Zimbardo. It was these individuals who instilled in me a passion to learn and teach psychology, and it was with their encouragement that I founded the Stanford Undergraduate Psychology Conference, a forum where undergraduate students from around the world meet annually to share their research and excitement for psychology.

The next 5 years were equally exciting. I left Stanford University in 2001 and went to the University of Oregon to work with Scott Monroe, a devoted mentor and brilliant clinical scientist. It was with Monroe that I learned to think deeply about psychology and under his guidance that I was named Graduate Teaching Fellow of the Year by readers of the *Oregon Daily Emerald*. By this point, I had taught or co-taught 19 courses, founded the Western Psychological Association Student Council, and helped found the Society of Clinical Psychology's Section on Graduate Student and Early Career Psychologists. For these contributions, I received the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (STP) McKeachie Graduate Student Teaching Excellence Award in 2005 and an STP Instructional Resource Award in 2006. Later that

year I received my PhD from the University of Oregon and subsequently moved to Boston, where I am currently a clinical psychology intern at McLean Hospital and a clinical fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

My Early Development as a Teacher

I became prepared to teach psychology as I believe all teachers do—through exposure to a complex mix of formal and informal lessons that pervade the early childhood, college, and post-college years. For some of us, the formal lessons were most formidable; for others, the informal lessons mattered most. When I reflect on my core values as a teacher, the formal lessons that I learned from my mentors were certainly influential, but no more so than my upbringing.

Growing up “selling nuts and bolts,” as my father used to call it, was never a glamorous job, but it did pay the bills, as well as afford me with numerous opportunities to learn from my parents. One thing I learned from them is that in order to immigrate to anywhere, you have to be flexible. You have to believe that you can learn a new language, acquire new skills, and, in essence, cultivate your mental faculties through practice. In other words, to be a successful immigrant, you have to believe that intellectual traits are malleable, because if they were not, there would be no way to adapt to the many challenges that accompany moving to a new country.

I never had a theoretical framework into which I could put these ideas, and then one day I read Carol Dweck’s (2006) *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. According to Dweck, people have either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset in relation to their various abilities, and it is the latter of these two perspectives that regards abilities, particularly intelligence, as changeable over time. Talents, from the growth mindset perspective, can be developed through hard work, and challenges are characterized as opportunities to learn rather than as barriers to success. This point has far-reaching consequences because mindsets guide behavior. Whereas individuals with a fixed mindset avoid challenges and decrease their effort after setbacks (because they believe that abilities are innate), those with a growth mindset develop strategies that enhance learning and future success (because they believe that abilities can be developed with practice, and that continued effort is the key to success).

The benefits of having a growth mindset as a teacher are numerous, and these were conveyed to me by Phil Zimbardo, who jumpstarted my teaching career by asking me to serve as an assistant for his introductory psychology course. It was uncommon for undergraduate students to teach at Stanford University, but Zimbardo felt it was never too early to begin, so I ended up teaching my first introductory psychology section while a senior. The experience could well have been daunting, but Zimbardo instead made it empowering, as he described teachers as people who are never perfect, but who instead improve over time. Master teachers, he has argued, are not characterized by an innate gift to give the perfect lecture, but rather by a drive to always “make it better next time” (Zimbardo, 2005). This strategy of continual improvement through hard work is the key to having a growth mindset.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

The challenge associated with becoming better over time, of course, is that it takes a lot of time. Or, at least that is what seems to be the case when professional duties are regarded as separate entities. I remember encountering this challenge during my first few years of teaching. Of primary concern was the feeling that I never had enough time (e.g., to create new classroom demonstrations, incorporate new findings into existing PowerPoint™ presentations, or develop new course modules). As time passed, the demands made on me increased while my free time decreased, and the result was a seemingly insolvable problem: How could I continue to improve as a teacher when so many different duties were requiring so much time?

I experienced this challenge for a number of years and then one day I stumbled upon what I now think is a reasonable solution. That day, which I remember clearly, occurred when a student in one of my psychopathology classes asked me to describe exactly how depression develops. I knew that stress and vulnerability combine to produce depression, but I was unable to attain a more specific answer from the literature. It turns out that surprisingly little was known at the time about how these factors interact, so I spoke with my advisor, and we subsequently conducted a study to examine the roles that life stress and cognitive vulnerability play in the onset of the disorder. What began as a great question from a student quickly translated into an empirical study, and the findings from that study were then integrated into my teaching curriculum. The result was a reciprocal, synergistic relationship between my teaching and research.

Research ideas surfacing from the psychopathology course is one example of how a synergistic relationship between teaching and research has improved my performance and efficiency in both domains. Other examples, though, were just as productive. For example, as a college student in the Silicon Valley during the “dotcom era,” I was deeply influenced by the Internet boom. One of my college buddies made \$40 million selling his textbook comparison algorithm to Yahoo!, and his friend developed a well-known website: www.google.com. Given that I was passionate about both psychology and technology at the time, I began to research technological devices that possess a persuasive intent, and three years later I translated this area of study into a course titled *Persuasive Computing: Using Technology to Change Attitudes and Behaviors*. The course taught students how to identify, critically analyze, and design persuasive technologies that change attitudes and behaviors for pro-social purposes, and it turned out to be a big hit among psychology, computer science, and business students alike. In retrospect, this popularity makes sense, insofar as courses born from novel research are inherently cutting edge in nature.

A take-away message from this integrative approach to teaching and research is that in order to maximize efficiency and increase teaching quality, one must continually make thematic connections between one’s various professional domains. Classrooms should be idea labs filled with “what ifs” that develop into honor theses, research projects, and advancements in clinical work (if relevant). Insights from clinical work and research may then become the basis for new lectures, courses, and service projects. This

fluid interchange among activities increasingly enhanced my performance in each domain over time, and the result has been a coherent program of teaching, research, mentorship, and clinical work that now constitutes my professional identity as a clinical scientist.

The Examined Life of a Teacher

There is a tendency inside us, a self-serving bias perhaps, that propagates the notion that most past career decisions were largely planned well in advance, but I think that the actual number of such events is overestimated. With respect to my career, I often wonder what I would be doing now if Stanford would have had an undergraduate business major; or, if that economics class had been more interesting; or, if my friend had never persuaded me to take introductory psychology. Where, exactly, would I be now?

My answers to these questions suggest that although premeditated decisions were critical to my professional development, I cannot underestimate the extent to which fortuitous events influenced my career. The most influential of these events entailed having John Gabrieli as my instructor for introductory psychology. Gabrieli was charismatic, and his class was like a dinner buffet on a cruise ship; everywhere you looked there was another delicious tidbit of information that he had prepared precisely to our liking. His lectures were never bland or boring, and they never seemed old or out of date. Every topic he discussed in class was a topic about which he was passionate, and his treatment of these topics made his love for psychology apparent. Put simply, Gabrieli made psychology come alive, and he did it in a way that made you want to take up learning as a career.

Teachers are spokespeople for their field of study, and their passion—or lack thereof—can make a difference. I learned this lesson during my freshman year in college when I could very well have become an economics major, if only the professor would have been passionate about economics. He was not, though, and from that experience I realized that boring teachers alienate students not only from learning about a specific topic area, but even worse, they run the risk of alienating students from learning in general. Passionate teachers have the opposite effect: They transform something fundamental inside of their students in order to foster a passion for continued learning.

The notion that teaching can be transformational is what rests at the heart of my personal philosophy of teaching, and I have referred to this approach to teaching as *transformational teaching* (Slavich, 2005). Transformational teaching goes beyond passive lecturing; it also goes beyond active learning. In transformational teaching, teachers are conceptualized as change agents who develop classroom activities that enhance the retention of core concepts by guiding students toward personal changes that are related to those concepts. These activities, called “self-change projects,” are deployed under the mentorship of an instructor, and they span a variety of course topics, including: concentration and memory, dating and relationships, fears and phobias, lifespan and development, strengths and virtues, hope, prejudice, shyness, time perspective, and heroism. The specific instructions for each project differ, but each begins with a classroom lecture and ends with an experiential activity. The fear and phobias self-change project, for example, asks students to first learn about fears and phobias in class, and to then apply some

basic cognitive behavior therapy strategies to monitor their feelings privately and to explore how they could be challenged.

Transformational teaching in this sense makes psychology come alive. It takes a course's core concepts out of the classroom and puts them into students' lives. It is active and it promotes the elaboration of a lesson's take-home message. It also personalizes the lessons so that they become more memorable, and thus more likely to be recalled on exams and throughout the lifespan. At the very least, transformational teaching should get non-psychology majors engaged in the course and its content; and at best, it underscores the relevance that psychology has to students' lives, turns non-psychology majors into psychology majors, makes students passionate about learning, and produces lifelong changes in how people view themselves and their ability to control how they think and behave.

If one thing has changed over the course of my relatively short career, it is that I now use more transformational teaching strategies than ever before. Students regularly tell me that they enjoy applying psychological principles to their lives whenever possible, because doing so apparently helps them understand how empirical studies, which sometimes appear esoteric and irrelevant, are actually often quite interesting and applicable to our daily lives. I could not agree more.

In retrospect, I would say that I have also become both more rigid and more flexible over the course of my short career. I am more rigid about conveying my expectations for how students should regard my course. Students' attention, input, and feedback are critical to the success of the class, and I want them to know this information up front. I also want them to know that my course will not be their typical college course. I believe that all students are capable of great things, and that with the right mindset—a growth mindset—they can accomplish virtually anything. I always convey this message on the first day of class because the effects of others' expectations on personal performance have been well documented (Bandura, 1992, 1997). High expectations produce better performances; low expectations do the opposite.

At the same time, I believe that I have become more flexible over time. I know that many factors influence students' classroom performance (some of which students cannot control), and my policies now take many of these factors into consideration. Students can select from among multiple grading options, any exam answer can be resubmitted for a second review, and early and late exams can be approved, with appropriate notification and justification.

My most rewarding moments come, of course, when all of the aforementioned strategies produce tangible gains. These gains include increased interest in the course; better understanding and retention of core concepts; increased likelihood of wanting to pursue an honors thesis or a major in psychology; and an increased interest in learning so that they may have a better, more fulfilling life. I measure students' performance and attitudes along these and other lines before and after each course, and this assessment element may be the most valuable addition I ever made to my classes. Feedback is critical to becoming a better teacher, and the more seriously one takes it, the better one gets.

It is easy to dispense sweeping advice about teaching, but I am hesitant to provide such advice, first because I do not pretend to know everything there is to know about teaching and second because advice often requires extrapolation. Instead of advice, then, I would like to summarize the four main points that I have taken away from my own journey. First, synergize your professional tasks and work toward having each inform the others. Second, be passionate or be gone, because boring lectures leave unrealized an unknown amount of student potential. Third, avoid implicitly promoting stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which assumes that abilities are fixed and yoked to demographic categories (like sex, race, age). Instead, work to establish a collective classroom growth mindset in which students believe they can become more intelligent through hard work. And fourth, be transformational, because there is so much more to teaching than merely conveying information.

Final Thoughts

In sum, I am not surprised that I ultimately chose to teach, but I can say this only now, in retrospect and at the end of my story, when its beginning finally makes sense. For me, it all began with my parents who taught me that knowledge is the only way to escape oppressive regimes and lifestyles. Forever selling 39 cent nuts and bolts would be one such lifestyle, and like most parents, mine wanted something better for me. They did not necessarily want me to teach, but they did want me to learn, and the more I learned, the better.

Through learning I realized that teaching is a wonderful profession, and with it comes a host of rights, responsibilities, and privileges. Teachers, for example, have the right to speak the empirical truth as they understand it to be, and they also have the responsibility to transmit this truth to others. Perhaps most importantly, though, teachers have the privilege to hold in their hands the potion that produces personal and collective betterment, and at least for me, I cannot imagine a more wonderful potion to possess.

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