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Personal Patterns Pervade the Path to Positive Pedagogical Performance

Mitchell M. Handelsman
University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center

I am currently professor of psychology and a CU President's Teaching Scholar at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center (UCDHSC). I earned my BA from Haverford College and my MA and PhD from the University of Kansas. I spent one year at Central Missouri State University before moving to UCDHSC in 1982.

I have been the recipient of several national awards, including the CASE Colorado Professor of the Year Award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education in 1992, and the Teaching Excellence Award from Division 2 of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1995. I was elected to Fellow status in APA in 2002. Part of my approach to teaching was featured in Kuther (2003).

My Early Development as a Teacher

My parents gave me many gifts, among them a sense of humor, introversion, sensitivity to others, and just enough self-esteem to take some risks, but not enough to waste people's time or to be satisfied with my performance. My sense of humor and sensitivity combined to form my ability to impersonate people—not so much famous people, but teachers, family members, and Irving, the kid on the next street over in my old Philadelphia neighborhood. My ability to impersonate others in a funny way helped me overcome shyness. I have always had trouble negotiating relationships—their ambiguity and complexity is exhilarating and lots of fun to explore, but daunting and often intimidating. Getting a laugh was (and still is) easier than walking up to people and introducing myself, which is difficult for me.

My attraction to teaching may be related both to my difficulty in relationships and to my aversion to appearing imperfect. Teaching, especially classroom teaching, has built-in relationships, authority, and power. It has much clearer role expectations than fields such as business, politics, psychotherapy, entertainment, crime, or research. As a teacher, I am automatically presumed to know more than the students, and I wield power by virtue of a little specialized knowledge. My relationships with students are relatively confined, safe, defined. Even when I admit I do not know something, I know how to find out.

Another profound gift from my parents was my undergraduate education at Haverford College. I was able to interact with and observe amazing professors who taught me what it meant

to be inquisitive. I learned a lot about teaching by watching them carefully (rather than by asking questions, of course).

One day I attended a review session for a Social Psychology class taught by Mr. Perloe. (We addressed all professors either by their first name or as Mr./Miss/Mrs.—it did not seem to impede our learning.) He stood at the front of the small lecture hall, without notes, and answered questions. In my usual awkward and flippant way, I asked something like, “What is this stupid study they describe in the book about paying people 1 dollar and 20 dollars?”

I remember Mr. Perloe smiling and wincing at the same time. Raising his voice a little, he said, “This is a *classic* study in psychology!” I could see him taking his and Festinger’s intellectual pursuits seriously and personally. At the same time, however, he showed great respect for the question and the questioner—he defended the study without attacking me. He went on to explain the study in detail, in a very patient way. I remember this incident every time I teach cognitive dissonance, every time I hold a review session. Every time my students challenge what I say, they are challenging psychology, which is a really good idea (even though my own first attempt was pathetic). They are challenging my ability to know and explain concepts, which is also a good idea. However, they are not challenging my right to exist or to teach, or my choice of profession, or my personhood. I learned from Sid Perloe that I can respond to students’ concerns without disrespecting them.

As a sophomore, I took Theories of Personality from Doug Heath, who has been the single most influential person in my intellectual life. Doug showed me how much fun it was to plumb the intellectual depths. He also taught me that teaching is a humanistic and creative enterprise (Heath, 1971). I can still picture and feel the day I was on the way from the dining center to my dorm, and he was walking (in a great hurry, as usual) in the opposite direction, coming from his office. Without stopping—I am not sure he even broke stride—he reached out his arm as we passed and just tapped me on the upper arm as he looked me in the eye and smiled. I was merely a student, and he simply, silently, and unmistakably treated me as a human being.

Doug was always trying something different. In class, he routinely had us form small groups, introduce ourselves, and discuss some issue. As part of one test, he asked us to write a question of our own and answer it. (My question was so bad he substituted a question of his own.) He had us grade ourselves at the end of the semester. He had optional “experiential” sessions after class. Back in the days before the Internet, he used technology by taping a lecture on Freud’s life and having us listen to it in the library. Through it all, he shared with us *why* he was doing all these things.

Doug, in fact, gave me my first teaching experience during the fall of my senior year, inviting Keith Neuman (another student, now a successful psychologist) and me to be teaching assistants in his Theories of Personality course. We held review sessions, we assisted in small-group exercises, and we even taught one class. Thus, my first classroom teaching was co-teaching. Keith and I met with Doug on a regular basis in his office. Although the meetings consisted mostly of him answering the phone, he served tea in a little corner of his office where there was a little rug under some padded chairs and a small couch.

I remember being attracted to some of the students for whom I was a TA. They were my peers, and they were coming for review sessions in the living room of my dorm suite. I think I knew that it was not right to act upon those feelings. However, it could also have been that I was too introverted to act. Either way, I experienced for the first time some of the complexity of teacher-student relationships.

Doug gave me my first official feedback on being a teacher when he let me read the letter of recommendation he wrote for me when I applied for graduate school. After three pages of wonderful stuff, he wrote that I needed to learn to become more involved, rather than taking a “more detached, ‘teacher,’ role.” I did not understand fully at that time what he was talking about, but he identified an issue that I have been struggling with ever since. Being a teacher is not only about engagement with knowledge or technique, but engagement with students.

During my last semester at Haverford, Doug taught a course called Psychological Issues in Education. In that course I read Rogers’s (1969) *Freedom to Learn*, which helped me understand that teaching and learning are about relationships as much as the material being learned. A good model for these relationships was Joel Perlish, a second-grade teacher at a local school. As part of Doug’s course, I spent one morning a week in Joel’s class. Joel’s students never sat in rows, never folded their hands, called him Joel, listened to Mozart during class (20 years before it became a fad), and learned a whole lot. I still imitate Joel’s wry mock-seriousness when he made a joke, with his little squint that accentuated the twinkle in his eye. I still have a tape of “Trash Can Blues,” recorded one day when I brought my trumpet and Joel spontaneously started banging on a trash can and marching around the room. I thought of the Trash Can Blues years later at a teaching workshop when Len Baron, the workshop leader, said, “The problem with most college teaching is that the professor knows exactly what’s going to happen.”

My next mentor was Rick Snyder, the program director and my graduate advisor at KU. On the first day of graduate school, Rick immediately demonstrated his respect and support for the students when he said, “The hardest thing about this program is getting in.” Today, I try to imitate (with inconsistent success) Rick and several other teachers from KU. I try to emulate

Rick's respect for students, his willingness to see education from students' perspectives, his mentoring techniques, and his ability always to keep student goals in mind. I try to imitate Erik Wright's permissive and inviting approach. I try to imitate Michelle Edwards's penetrating questions into students' clinical technique. I try (with *virtually no* success) to imitate Larry Wrightsman's encyclopedic knowledge combined with a conversational teaching style.

After graduate school I chose teaching rather than clinical work mostly because psychotherapeutic relationships were too complicated. Teaching allowed me to have relationships that were intense without being too intimate, multifaceted but with pretty clear boundaries, and helpful and fun at the same time.

Working at Defining Myself as a Teacher

The good news is that I had lots of great teachers, and imitating them was very helpful. However, I still needed to broaden my impersonation from copying mannerisms and behaviors to adopting attitudes, strategies, and justifications for all the fun techniques.

I can still imitate Doug Davis's hand gestures from way back at Haverford. I have not yet been able to talk in such eloquent and complete sentences the way he did. When he spoke, I could almost see the semi-colons, subordinate clauses, and parentheses. My attempt to imitate his speech is really an attempt to think as deeply and as carefully as he.

For a long time, I imitated Doug Heath's use of small groups. Twenty years later my understanding of cooperative learning reached a new level. Ed Nuhfer, who was the director of teaching excellence at CU-Denver, invited Karl Smith (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991) to campus to conduct a workshop: a whole-day workshop of cooperative learning, *all done cooperatively*—the best workshop I have ever experienced. Karl taught me about cooperative learning, and about practicing what you preach.

In my better moments, I was able to use what I had observed for my own purposes. Back at Haverford, Professor Wyatt MacGaffey came into our sociology class one day, and just sat silently at the table in front of the class. After a few uncomfortable moments, one student tentatively started the conversation, and other students joined in. Mr. MacGaffey never told us why he had started class that way, but I always remembered it. Years later I was casting around for some experiential exercise to teach students about assertiveness. I adapted MacGaffey's behavior—and wound up sitting silently through entire class periods in four different personal adjustment courses (Handelsman & Friedlander, 1984).

Some habits and behaviors I copied whole, because my models were so strong. In my first week at Kansas, Rick Snyder had me sit in on mock orals for one of his doctoral students. Now I routinely have my students practice their oral exams and conference presentations in front

of me, other students, and whomever else we can round up. I also learned from Rick that mentoring—as he put it when I asked him for yet another letter of recommendation 15 years after I had graduated—is a “lifetime deal.”

The Examined Life of a Teacher

For a while, teaching accentuated my strengths and hid my weaknesses. By imitation of a range of my professors and other teachers, I was able to generate good evaluations, win awards, and stay out of the way of good students. All the skills that got me into teaching continually need to be adjusted and augmented to make me better. From the beginning I knew that the teacher-student relationship is more complicated than it looked. If I wanted to imitate the impact of my professors and not just their mannerisms, I needed to work on relating more to my students as human beings, and not to worry so much about appearing perfect.

For help with the teacher-student relationship, I turned to my clinical training, especially regarding the complexities and boundaries of the psychotherapeutic relationship. I started thinking about ethics, which has been the focus of my research for the last 20 years. Ethical issues and principles provide a good framework for me to understand the dynamics of therapy, teaching, and all professional relationships. I spent 10 years studying informed consent (Handelsman, 2001), which deals with making the rules of professional relationships explicit. I applied this ethical doctrine to my course syllabi (Handelsman, Rosen, & Arguello, 1987), which I use to help clarify the nature of my relationship with students in my classes. Ethical principles, combined with the clinical theory of Rogers (1959), forms the basis of my philosophy of teaching (Handelsman, 2005).

Recently, my colleague Carl Pletsch and I were talking about growing older and how that affects our teaching. He mentioned that teaching is a developmental process, and we *cannot* teach now the way we did before. This is good news and bad news for me. On the bad side, it means that in a few years all the insights that I have now (which I think are wonderful) will be obsolete, at least for me. The good news is that there is always something to work on and improve.

These days I am trying to increase the range of students I can inspire, students with a wider variety backgrounds, academic achievements, and strengths. I am lecturing fewer times per semester, and never for more than 18 minutes at a time. I am also trying to have more authentic relationships with students (without getting unethical)—hearing their stories as I reflect on my own. Years after I heard a presentation by my colleague Mike Cummings, I’ve developed the guts to take his suggestion and meet individually with each student in my class. Last semester I started introducing myself and shaking hands with every student as they entered class the first

day. This semester I am trying out what we (my students and I) are calling the “bottoms up” discussion, in which students sit ON the tables rather than on the chairs behind the tables. The first time we tried this bottoms up discussion the atmosphere in the room immediately became more informal and students reported feeling more comfortable expressing their ideas.

I am trying to expand my horizons by hooking up with colleagues whose attitudes, principles, ways of being-in-the-world and being-in-the-classroom I can imitate. Working closely with colleagues Bill Briggs, Ed Nuhfer, Carl Pletsch, and Margie Krest has meant that I have had to show my imperfections to a much greater extent than before. It has been worth it, though. I spent a year sitting in on a liberal arts mathematics class taught by Bill Briggs (Briggs, Sullivan, & Handelsman, 2004). He inspired me profoundly—not to be like him, but to be more like *myself*. I help train teachers every summer, and I watch Ed Nuhfer design and run a week-long, intensive training experience. At these workshops I co-teach with Carl Pletsch, who reflects (and inspires me to reflect) on *every* bit of teaching we do to see what happened and what can be improved. I observe and learn from Margie Krest—an expert in scientific writing and the best teacher I have ever seen—how to help students learn how to think by learning to write and revise (Handelsman & Krest, 1996/1999).

One of the most effective ways I have found to assess quickly how my new efforts working is by using a Student Management Team, about which Ed Nuhfer (2003) taught me. In one course just about every semester, I regularly meet with a group of current students who give me suggestions about what can be done immediately to improve the course. The team keeps me thinking about why I do what I do in a course, and it keeps me honest by assuming my imperfection.

Advice for New Teachers

This is a short and pretty basic list, because I am not confident that my more specific advice will be good for anyone but me, or even that in five years it will still be good for me.

Know yourself and know your students.

Use your experience as a student as a guide, but only a rough one. Remember, your experiences are incomplete and do not prepare you for everything.

Do not mistake giving high grades for being nice or caring. Likewise, do not mistake being mean or sarcastic as having high standards. Standards and respect are two different things. We can have high standards and be respectful of students at the same time.

Get a life. Do not think of yourself as, and do not be, only a teacher.

Final Thoughts

I make a habit of handing out course evaluation questionnaires at the midpoint in the semester. One comment/question I received several years ago in an introductory class was something like, “I don’t understand how you can be so enthusiastic and energetic every day!” I read the question out loud, and then improvised this answer, which I had not thought about in these terms before:

College changed my life. The professors I had inspired me and made me a better student and a better human being. There’s a possibility that sometime during this semester one of you will be inspired in this class and your life will be changed forever. The problem is: I don’t know who it’s going to be and I don’t know when it’s going to happen. So I have to be prepared.

My work as a college teacher is my way of showing my gratitude to my Haverford professors (including many not named in this essay) by trying to inspire my students the way they inspired me. Someday, Doug, I will get closer to the right teacher role for me and for more of my students. Promise.

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