Teaching Philosophy: The False Dichotomy of Teaching vs. Research
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I have written several of these teaching philosophies over the years, but in recent years, I have fundamentally changed how I think about my teaching as a research-active professor in a Carnegie doctoral extensive university. The essence of this change begins with recognition of the falseness of an unholy trinity of false dichotomies many hold sacred in the academy: basic vs. applied research, science vs. practice, and, the one most relevant for my philosophy of teaching, research vs. teaching. After over a quarter of a century doing this work, I have come to see that each of these false dichotomies blocks creativity, hampers intellectual synergy, and keeps intellectuals—including emerging intellectuals—apart when what we need most is to be engaged in conversations with one another.

The research-teaching dichotomy is particularly pernicious, the one that has taken me the longest to recognize as the charlatan that it is. When I finally set it aside, what became clear to me was that the best and truest purpose of a research university is simultaneously to push back the frontiers of knowledge and to do so while integrating students fully into the scholarly enterprise. This includes exposing students to scholars in their everyday academic lives. By scholars, I mean active, functioning producers of knowledge. This exposure occurs in classrooms, in laboratories, in seminars, in informal discussions, in blogs, in listserves, and elsewhere. Why is this the best and truest purpose of a research university? As Lord Winston Churchill has said, “Never ...was so much owed by so manyto so few.” Over 4,500 institutions of higher education in the U.S. rely on the scholarship produced at just a couple hundred research universities. These places not only produce most of the scholarship. They also produce most of the scholars. Paraphrasing Rabbi Hillel, if not us, who? If not now, when?

The essence of my teaching philosophy is to engage students in scholarship—for the moment, for the semester, for their time at UF, and for a lifetime. I tell my undergraduates that I want them to consider very seriously careers as scholars. I explain that they have the ability to become scholars, that UF is a place teeming with scholars, and that the world needs people like them to solve the tough intellectual challenges that the current generation of scholars has not solved. I point out that the type of scholarship I am committed to is science, though they have other choices. Likewise, I point out that the type of science I am committed to is psychological science, though, again, they have other choices.

Though my philosophy shares some features with the emerging scholarship on teaching and learning, I did not derive it from those writings. In addition, mine originates from my own experience as a psychological scientist and secondarily from my experience as a classroom instructor, whereas my reading of the scholarship of teaching and learning is that it typically originates from a classroom focus and then branches to a scholarly focus. I admire that work, but I view it as more complementary than similar to my own perspective.

I take the time in each undergraduate course to talk about what is fun and fulfilling about being a psychological scientist. I talk about my own science, not just the finished product, but also about the behind-the-scenes science that scientific journal articles do not reveal. I share my lab’s recent successes and failures. We talk about the funny and quirky experiences that characterize nearly every scientist’s career. I talk about the “great” ideas we had that just happened not to garner any supporting evidence.

I also talk about the personal lives of the scholars whose theories and research we are learning in class. I tell their biographies. The reason I do is so students can see the so much research is “me-search,” an extension of the personal life of the scholar. Alfred Adler was a sickly and accident-prone child with older siblings, and he developed the inferiority complex. John B. Watson paid his way through college by taking care of a rat colony and rat behavior becomes the center point for his development of the psychology of behaviorism. What is important about helping students see the me-search in the research is that it encourages them to think of their own ideas and experiences as valuable. If I know the scholars personally, I also talk about my experiences with and of them. For example, the outspoken and sometimes outrageous B. F. Skinner was the consummate gentleman when I met him. C. R. (Rick) Snyder was not only the world’s foremost authority on the psychology of hope, but he was also someone who supported young scholars, even when they critiqued his work, a fact I

know first-hand! And why do I do that? So UF students will view the gap between themselves and those whose scholarship they learn as smaller, as spanable. “Maybe I could be someone like Skinner.”

Continuing this process of enticing students to consider careers in scholarship, I assign, discuss, and test students on a large group of original, primary source articles and chapters. This assignment is usually given in addition to a textbook. Students learn that scholars do not rely on textbooks, so as incipient scholars they need to have experience doing what working scholars do, namely reading original scholarship. The message is “this is what we do; get used to it.” We have after-class discussions about the readings. We talk about the interpretation that the textbook authors made of a particular primary source and whether we agree with that interpretation.

In addition, we engage in scholarly conversation. To me scholarly conversation is so important that we do it even in large lecture classes. We do it even if it means we do not “cover all the material” for that day. In real scholarship, these conversations are more valuable than reciting or recording lecture notes. We question each other. We generate other ways of thinking about the data. We raise apparent contradictions in theories or between theories and evidence. We speculate about how to explain an observation about human behavior.

Early in a semester, I invite participation. When it occurs, I welcome it, giving the person raising an issue or asking a question my full focus. I make it clear that I do not have the right and final answer. I make it clear that the best ideas or data win the day, not the social status of the person making the argument. I applaud creative and incisive contributions. I link those contributions to being a scholar and I sometimes can link them to the contributions of scholars we are studying.

My position on laptops and smart phones is an extension of this same perspective. Many people use laptops in my class and I love it. We use students' laptops as another tool to extend the scholarly conversation. We look up research articles, definitions of terms, additional opinions about issues we are discussing. However, what if they are reading their email, watching YouTube, or buying a plane ticket? My view is that an instructor cannot force scholarly engagement, but he or she can entice it. By the end of the semester, students are anticipating what we need to find on the internet and are digging in on their own and reporting what they found. Then it all becomes clear to me and I hope to them that the teaching-research dichotomy is more illusory than real.

Teacher becomes student. Student becomes scholar. Scholar becomes teacher. The circle that should have been in place all along is complete.

In my graduate classes, this process of scholarly inclusion goes even further. Within the limits of the key objectives that must be taught, graduate students have wide latitude to focus on the aspects and approaches most directly relevant to their personal scholarly goals. With instructor collaboration and final consent, students select projects, exam questions, grading criteria, and they give lectures and create other group learning experiences. We are each other’s teachers. We are scholars together. In my research lab, though we are not covering a course content area, such as personality psychology or the psychology of vocational behavior, the process really is not very different. Each lab meeting focuses on a topic, such as evaluating a graduate student’s latest proposed experiment, discussing the best solution to a data analysis problem, or developing a new conceptualization for a behavioral phenomenon. Teacher is student. Student is scholar. Scholar is teacher. The circle is unbroken.

So are all my pedagogical practices in harmony with my new philosophy? No. I still give multiple-choice tests. I still lecture on content. I still assign standard textbooks. I still teach large numbers of students in impersonal lecture halls. Still, those apparent deviations or at least potential deviations from my philosophy of teaching are understandable and at least temporarily acceptable because my philosophy represents a new perspective for me. My teaching is a process undergoing continual assessment and change, just like my research program. Again, the dichotomy between teaching and research is more apparent than real and the circle more real than was initially apparent.