Avoiding Undergraduate Teaching Burnout

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Welcome to The Academics’ Forum, a new editorial column that focuses on concerns and issues facing those in academia. Hard for me (and also for my advisor) to believe, but it has now been a full decade since I received my PhD from Texas A&M University. I chose to become an academic and have never regretted the decision. It is a fulfilling and rewarding career path. I am currently an associate professor of psychology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. However, those of us who focus our careers on research and teaching, regardless of whether it is in a business school or a psychology department, do face unique challenges and issues. I will focus this editorial column on concerns and issues, both teaching and research related, facing academics during all stages of their careers.

My first topic is one of great interest to me at this stage of my career, and I suspect of interest to others who have been teaching 10 or more years: how to avoid teaching burnout. I have now been teaching introductory undergraduate I-O psychology for nearly every semester for 10 years. I enjoy teaching and enjoy teaching I-O but have found that, at times, I do not have the same level of excitement giving, let’s say, a lecture on organizational justice for the 20th time as I had during the first few years of teaching, even though organizational justice is one of my favorite topics. I have also noticed that some of my more experienced colleagues become better instructors with experience but others have reduced enthusiasm for teaching. Thus, I decided to ask teaching experts how they keep their teaching fresh and maintain their enthusiasm for teaching. I was overwhelmed by their responses and, thus, instead of discussing this topic in only one column, I plan to discuss it in two columns. The first teaching expert is Paul Muchinsky, Joseph M. Bryan Distinguished Professor of Business at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and inaugural recipient of the SIOP Distinguished Teaching Contribution Award.

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I received my PhD in 1973 from Purdue. I was very much part of the rich and hoary legacy of I-O PhDs from Purdue. I felt it was my teaching obliga-
tion to serve as a “missionary” of the discipline to my students. For the first 8 years or so I concentrated on “getting it right.” I faithfully and dutifully dotted the *is* and crossed the *ts* of I-O, explaining the facts and theories to be sure my students knew them at a level of proficiency I would expect of an undergraduate. I then entered phase two of my own evolution as a teacher. I came to realize that all of the undergraduate I-O textbooks were, to be blunt, very dry and boring. This seemed like such a grave injustice to our field. Here is this thing that we do, work, and we do more of it in our life than anything else, including sleep. How could we succeed in making our primary activity in life sound so boring? I talked myself into believing I could write a “high-quality undergraduate textbook” on I-O. My idea was immediately greeted with skepticism. I was told “high quality” meant “graduate level,” and “graduate level” was a synonym for “rigor.” Therefore, nobody could write a high-quality book at the undergraduate level that would capture the hearts and minds of 19-year old students. In 1982 the first edition of my textbook, *Psychology Applied to Work*, was published. It was my pride and joy, and my teaching I-O became an exercise of using my own spoken words in the classroom as a channel to the book I had written. Thus, my students got two doses of me: one in print and one in class. In my own days as a student, I never had a professor who had written the textbook used in the class, so this was a really heady experience for me (and according to my students, for them as well). The market was very receptive to my book. I have revised it for over 25 years. (That is one-quarter of a century!) It has been published in several foreign languages. The 9th edition of the book will be published in the summer of 2008. It is the most widely read book in the history of I-O psychology, and my having written it was the “fuel” that kept my teaching fires burning.

However, every professor cannot write a textbook. There must be something else that keeps us from going stale. I have discovered what it is but only after many years of teaching. I cannot tell you the exact year in my career I became aware of it, but I know it was truly a transforming event in my life. I came to realize that all the years I had been teaching, I was teaching “for them”—my students. Like eating leftovers, the same food, no matter how cleverly reconstituted, tastes the same, and eventually it becomes more of a chore than a delight to consume it. I then realized for my own mental and emotional welfare (and energy), I had to stop teaching for my students and start teaching FOR ME! In my address to SIOP on having been the inaugural recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award, I said our teaching style is an extension of our own personality. If you want to be a good teacher (of I-O, or anything else), you must first recognize what is most important is “the singer” not “the song.” Use your class time to channel what is special and unique about you. In looking back, I chose my first phase of teaching style (to get it right) because it was the most secure, the most safe, the most defensible, and also because it required the least work on my part. I read my lines
like an actor reading a script. If the audience didn’t like my performance, I could always blame it on a “bad script.” How can I-O psychology possibly compete with Abnormal Sexual Behavior in sustaining student interest, I would say to myself. It was only when I realized I was slowly being transformed into an “academic vending machine,” a dispenser of three credit hours, did I realize I was well on my way to burnout. I was becoming burned out, as what was fresh to my students was old to me, and I couldn’t hide it from them. The tedium in myself washed over my students, and I soon had created the ultimate nightmarish tautology in academia—stale, bored professors incubate stale, bored students. The solution had to reside in me, not my students, and not in the content of the material I was teaching.

This third phase of my own teaching style is totally generalizable and universal. It begins by inverting the fundamental paradigm. Do not try to be like those who taught you, for you can be nothing more than a weak imitation of them. Rather, put all your energies into first understanding yourself as a person, and then use that understanding to fashion your teaching style around who you are. If you are fundamentally a “stat person” who believes life is made up of an endless series of equations, then accept that about yourself, and teach your classes showing the logic (and beauty) of equalities—something to the left of the equal sign equals something to the right of the equal sign. If you resonate to passion and energy, forget about “violating established teaching protocol”—there is none. And if we think there is, it is why teaching tends to be dry and teachers tend to burn out. Don’t be afraid to make yourself the center of your teaching universe. Once you begin to feel comfortable in allowing yourself to be you (instead of someone else, or instead of the way you feel you “should” conduct yourself), you will radiate with self-confidence, and your students will gravitate to it. Your obvious energy and passion will energize and impassion them. Believe it or not, this entire phenomenon is delightfully contagious in the classroom. Soon your students will exhibit signs of real learning and growth. They will say something like, “I’ve always wanted to ask this question, but I’ve always felt awkward about asking it before, but can you please explain why...?” Be honored that you have inspired at least one student to speak from the heart. However, your answer must be as nakedly honest as the question posed. Students can detect “canned” answers, and you will lose them just when you are on the verge of capturing them. In short, get over the guilt of abandoning the “actor’s role” in teaching. Great teaching begins with first understanding the teacher, not what is to be taught. Some research has been done on teachers who have had an enduring impact on the lives of students, sometimes 30, 40, and 50 years after the class. The overwhelming finding is that students long forget what was taught, but they remember something endearing about the teacher, which is why he or she is remembered decades later. What is recalled typically pertains to passion, energy, caring, sincerity, and so on, the “stuff”
of the person, not the subject matter. In my perfect university, each professor has a unique teaching style, each built on our own unique personalities. It takes tremendous courage to both be yourself and to derive satisfaction from it. I believe burnout is the end result of incongruity, a forced fit between two things that no longer go together. I don’t believe you can ever burn out being yourself, particularly as we ourselves change over the course of our own lives, and our teaching style merely mirrors where we are in that stage of our own evolution. I am pleased to say that heading off to class is the highlight of my work day. Some days it is still a struggle (I still haven’t find a way to make job analysis riveting), but other days I don’t walk out of class, I float, intoxicated with my own brew.

**Future Columns**

Next time I will present the responses of Janet Kottke, professor of psychology at Cal State Bernardino, and Peter Bachiochi, associate professor of psychology at Eastern Connecticut State University, both of whom have been prolific in writing articles and giving presentations regarding the teaching of undergraduate I-O psychology. Also, if you have advice in how to avoid teaching burnout and how to keep a course “fresh” that you are willing to share, please e-mail me your suggestions.

Finally, a topic for a future column will be finding populations from which to collect data for research purposes. If you have a good idea regarding how to collect data from a population other than the traditional subject pool and are willing to share the idea, please e-mail me. Ideas regarding how to collect data other than one-time self-report data would be especially welcome. Also, I welcome suggestions for future topics. My e-mail address is roch@albany.edu.