

Avoiding Teaching Tedium

Do Something Before the Doldrums Set In

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I read an interesting pseudonymous piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* yesterday (“*I Don’t Like Teaching. There, I Said It.*”). The author made the perfectly valid point that many people who don’t really like teaching are in fact teachers who routinely rise to the occasion. Despite not enjoying the work, they still do a good or even great job. Some are even award winning teachers without the love that dare not speak its name (at least within earshot of the dean or department chair).

I am sure quite a few psychology faculty members don’t especially like teaching but they would never admit it for fear of reprisals or simple embarrassment: Why make a career doing something you don’t enjoy? Why, indeed?

Of course, teaching is only one thing among many that psychologists do. Most college or university professors probably typically pursue some scholarly research agenda, at least in the early part of the careers (and lack of enjoyment of conducting and publishing psychological research is a separate but important matter, one I will tackle here in the future). Other psychologists engage in some form of practice, such as seeing some number of clients in some form of therapeutic situation in order to maintain their clinical skills, licensure, and to be able to teach students about counseling with firsthand knowledge. And still other psychologists do consulting, take part in university administrative work, serve as department heads or chairs, act as deans or provosts, and the list goes on.

Still, teaching is a BIG part of what makes an academic career in psychology. There is no escaping that fact. Faculty polls routinely reveal that most academics (including psychologists) spend most of their time prepping and teaching courses. So, we are back to the problem we began with: What to do if you don’t especially like what you are doing much of the time?

Well, one can soldier on and excel, as the author of the *Chronicle* piece suggested. Or, one can leave the classroom entirely to do something else, such as becoming a barista or teaching ballroom dancing. Perhaps, but both of these choices seem a bit extreme, although I think soldiering on does have some merits (if only in a guilt-ridden, hair-shirt sort of way).

My response is a more moderate one: If you don’t enjoy the teaching you are doing then make some changes. Many teachers equate teaching not so much with classroom performance as they do with evaluating students and grading them. There, I think, is one of the main sources of the teaching doldrums (it seems a bit early to use “doldrums” because it’s only early June—we are still far from the dog days of August but hey, it works). I know few people who admit to having serious, sustained enthusiasm for grading papers or even tests. Grading well is hard, often thankless work. Besides adding some summative mark at the end (an A, a B, a C, and so on), good, no great, teachers also add some formative comments about the quality of the student’s analysis (at least on a paper or an essay exam).

I think the solution, if not one’s salvation, lies in rethinking and retooling how a course is taught. If you are bored lecturing, for example, then have more class discussion. If you hate grading multiple choice tests (and you should), then assign essay exams. If you don’t think students do their best essay writing “cold” and on demand in a classroom testing session (and to be truthful, I think texting has reduced students “on demand” writing skills substantially), then assign take home essay tests.

If the standard term paper fills you with dread (i.e., one of those 10 to 15 page monsters), then stop assigning them to students who have no love for them, either (although I do get a student or two every few years who love to write analytical papers—bless them). Instead, develop other assessment exercises that are more engaging for

students to write and for you to read. I've had students write letters to a peer (real or imagined) in another class, you can have them write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or create an op-ed piece (one of my colleagues often has her classes jointly craft an op-ed piece that is submitted for publication in the local newspaper). Students can write movie reviews or book reviews; you can have them write a critical review of an already published journal article, too.

There is quite an extensive pedagogical literature in psychology chock full of examples of things one can do to make teaching more engaging for the sage on the stage (or the guide on the side) as well as the students themselves. The only excuse to suffer through and to stick with the standards is if one believes there is some serious educational reason for doing so. I'm not sure there is—because “that’s what I had to do at Ivy League U”, for example, is not terribly convincing.

The summer break from teaching is a terrific time to rethink things so as to avoid teaching tedium come fall. Why not start to make some plans now so that you will enjoy what you do when it is again "show time"?