

Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Learning from Turning Points in Our Teaching Lives

Do we really reach our teaching potential by mid-career? Principles from the learning sciences hold equally well for learners on both sides of the classroom. Applying them to our own learning stories can lead to vital growth at any stage of our careers.

BY NED BACHUS
*Community College of
Philadelphia, Retired*

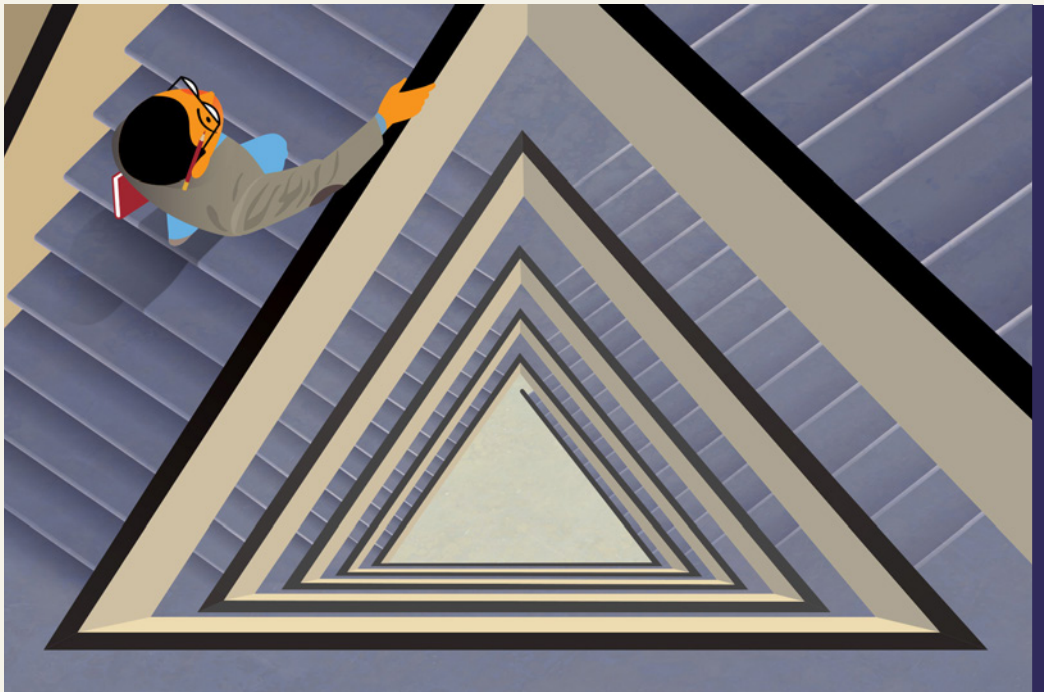
A nightmare for most teachers would be to find oneself turned into one of *The Teaching Dead*—those tenured pedagogical zombies we see shuffling between office and classroom in every campus on the map. Fortunately, they constitute a small fraction of the teaching population, but even in the best circumstances the difficulties and frustrations of the job put college teachers at risk for burnout.

We find ways to stay fresh in our work. We create or teach a new course, search for new materials, and return to texts and assignments that worked well a few semesters or decades ago.

We attend workshops, conferences, and professional development programs. We talk with colleagues about mundane and cosmic challenges of the work. We read articles and books in our fields—plural because we have at least two fields: our academic discipline and the art and science of teaching and learning.

If we look back after years of such effort, we might recognize that along the way we reached certain moments that mattered. We changed.

When we consider those turning points in the light of the learning sciences we can better understand how we changed, putting ourselves in position to continue growing as teachers.



Meet Ned Bachus



Award-winning educator **NED BACHUS** changed how and what he taught by looking back at life's turning points through

the lenses offered by the learning sciences. Bachus, whose *City of Brotherly Love* won the 2013 IPPY Gold Medal in Literary Fiction, tells that story in *Open Admissions*. His "Turning Points" blog on nedbachus.com and Open Admissions page on Facebook reach thousands of readers, including teachers, students, people in recovery, and formerly incarcerated individuals. Founder of the first U.S. rugby club for the Deaf, Bachus is a member of the Blackthorn Rugby Football Club's Hall of Fame, and songwriter and lead vocalist for the roots rock band Sacred CowBoys.

Maxed Out by Forty? Not So Fast.

No college teacher wants to go flat, to run out of steam and ideas. Engaged teachers want to improve. Asked to articulate their creed, they might say: Stay vital. Up my game. But does improvement have its ceiling?

Once at a faculty development session, I heard a sighing colleague insist that after 15 or so years in the classroom, college teachers had little room for improvement. I went slack-jawed. Later I wondered: Does such fatalistic thinking hold for other

professions? For surgeons, entrepreneurs, artists? I knew that I had changed, and that I had learned a few things about learning.

For most of us, growth began when we met our first class. We continued it through formal programs and activities, as well as personal reflection, collegial conversation, and the laboratory of the classroom.

In 2011, I got closer to the work by going far away. In an Irish cottage, I unraveled the various threads in my life that had led me there. Freed from normal distractions, I remembered story after story from 40 years as a teacher and counselor, nearly 38 at my alma mater, Community College

of Philadelphia. Theories began to hit home in entirely new ways! It wasn't lost on me that every time I (or something around me) changed, I learned in significant new ways.

As a reader/writer, I knew story as one of humankind's tried and true tools. When had I acquired the particular lens through which I interpreted stories? That was another story.

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > A WRITER-TEACHER

I began the fall term of 2011 knowing that by its end I would decide whether to take early retirement from my dream job at my alma mater. In a journal, I tracked the days and nights of what might become my final semester in the classroom.

The following April, I moved into a cliff-side cottage on the southwest coast of Ireland for a sabbatical month of writing. Thousands of miles from my family and without a car, Internet access, or television, I soon realized I was not alone. Ghosts, in the form of remem-

bered students and colleagues, barged in and made sure my writing focused on the powerful social aspects of learning.

In the wind-swept isolation of Europe's austere western edge, stories crisscrossed my mind, competing for my

attention. As a fiction writer, I respected the power of story. As a counselor/teacher, I'd studied learning and change. And as a human, I'd learned to discern the people I should trust. I hoped that I'd improved as a teacher. I knew that I had changed.

A month later, I left the little cottage with a very rough manuscript and a fresh mission: to encourage all learners, including teachers, to study the turning points in their lives in the light of the learning sciences.

I followed those threads back. Each encounter with the work of a serious theorist or researcher equipped me with a way to identify and understand what is behind new learning. Like a surgeon acquiring various OR techniques, I developed my repertoire of explanations so that I could apply the most apt concepts to account for a particular example of learning.

Albert Bandura's concept of **reciprocal determinism** provided one of those useful perspectives. A change in **behavior, environment, or personal factors** (cognitions, beliefs, values) can prompt a change in one or both of the other factors. I explain this to students as a triangle of change.

How did I learn about reciprocal determinism? I decided to teach with a friend from the psychology department. Three days a week, for an hour, I taught academic writing to beginning students, then my buddy worked with the same group for an hour of introductory psychology.

Our linked courses featured common reading and writing assignments and exams, which we graded together. My reading assignments supplemented those from the psych half, and included literature that we used as case studies. Preparing for the semester, I read my partner's psychology texts. Teachers are familiar with two kinds of reading: 1) that done in preparation for teaching the particular text, and 2) all other kinds of reading. My approach to reading psych content quickly became the first.

The reading changed everything forever. It was a turning point that led me to change content in my writing course—even in unlinked versions of it—as well as practices and procedures in all of my courses.

- Partnering changed my teaching **environment** from the traditional stand-alone/teach alone course to the very different world of shared students, topics, and assignments.

"IT WASN'T LOST ON ME THAT EVERY TIME I (OR SOMETHING AROUND ME) CHANGED, I LEARNED IN SIGNIFICANT NEW WAYS."

- That environmental change led me to a new **behavior**: reading psych texts.
- Encountering concepts that explained learning, such as reciprocal determinism, led to new **cognitions**, like the belief that teachers and students should know the basics about learning.
- That new belief led me to the **behavior** of incorporating such concepts into various aspects of my course.
- Changing my collaborative course's content and practices prompted me to go back to the stand-alone course **environment** and change those courses as well.

Knowledge of such concepts enables us to understand turns in life from the perspective of experts in learning sciences. Holed up in Cottage 8, I tried to recall those memories. Story after story about my students and about me drove home the same two points about learning: 1) significant learning implies personal change, and 2) other people often figure into our learning.

Mining our teaching stories points us to key factors in our development as teachers, but we also can apply this approach to other learning experiences in our lives. Social and sociocultural factors loomed large in my self-study. I'd never been the most talented rugby player on the pitch, musician on the bandstand, or fiction writer in a writers group, but in each capacity I improved because of interaction with people around me. Not surprisingly, joining a faculty team made a difference in my career.

Now when I work with faculty, I ask them to describe a few learning experiences from their lives, any age or setting, that they consider important. Unpacking that information in the light of the learning sciences can provide enough conversation threads to keep a faculty group busy for a semester of professional development. Try it and see where it leads you.

We want and expect our students to develop skills in various academic areas because we know that they will need them. Shouldn't that list of competencies include some basic knowledge about learning? And in sharing what the learning sciences offer,

■ BEST PRACTICES > IN THE CLASSROOM

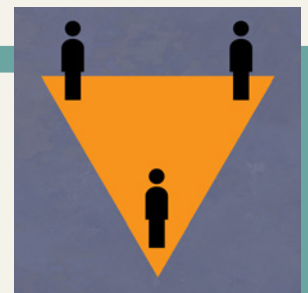
What I learned about social aspects of learning impacted almost every aspect of my freshman composition course. From the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, my students learned about scaffolding, ZPD—zone of proximal development—and the value of a guide in the learning process. Using

his concepts, they explained an instance of learning in their life.

From Laurence Steinberg's work, they learned of peer influence and, from the writings of Martin S. Seligman, about positive psychology. With concepts like observational learning and locus of control, they explained how literary characters learned

and changed. The culminating assignment asked students to draw upon everything they'd learned about learning to explain the changed beliefs, values, and practices of the lead character in Susan Dodd's novel *No Earthly Notion*. In an assignment written only for the eyes of the instructor(s), they applied learning concepts to an

example of change in their life, an exercise that revealed the myriad challenges faced by nontraditional students but also their capacity for practical application of what they were learning.



we just might be nudging them toward their own epiphany—and how to have more epiphanies.

Earlier, I described one such turning point in my growth as a teacher, but many forces influenced my teaching. Looking back at the pattern of influences reminded me of two key principles that had been poking through all of my stories: learning involves change and other people often play a role in our learning.

In volunteer work with nonprofit organizations, I have seen one example after another of the wide applicability of learning principles beyond the classroom. So many of the concepts that I eagerly introduced to my students fit into conversations about other kinds of changing, whether the learners are formerly incarcerated individuals, people in recovery from substance use disorder, or politicians with an honest commitment to service. They've all got stories. They just need a few tools.

“SHOULDN'T THAT LIST OF [STUDENT] COMPETENCIES INCLUDE SOME BASIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LEARNING?”

Teachers who look to the learning sciences find rich resources. For me, application to life's key moments has proved useful.

Guided by the learning sciences, my fellow teachers will discover where their journey leads. Do it for your own sake and because your students deserve teachers who have not flat-lined. Stay true to your pedagogical creed. Reject the idea that at a certain point you can't improve as a teacher. Keep upping your game

And don't ignore the key learning moments in your own life. They may identify for you the factors that have helped you along the way and that can feed your development as a teacher, a process that you began semesters or decades ago and that has kept you open-minded enough to continue reading about learning.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

MAKING IT WORK

What if my institution has no structure for collaborative teaching?

If no such arrangement exists, meet with department heads, staff from your teaching and learning center or honors program, or a faculty or administrative leader that might be inclined to help you propose a trial program. English teachers make obvious candidates for pairing with “content” colleagues, but I've seen successful collaboration without members of my tribe!

Where do you locate your approach on the It Takes A Village—I Built It Myself continuum?

I considered that question when I watched my last group of students quietly but furiously fill up blue books for their final exam. In Open Admissions, I wrote: “My course had

stressed to them the social nature of learning. I'd encouraged them to take advantage of the help available to them. But when it came to performing for evaluation, students generally had to stand alone.” Both sides of the collectivist-individualist argument hold a piece of the picture. Certain people make great differences in our lives, but at some point one must pick up the ball and run with it. When we do that, we find other people also occupy the field—teammates, opponents, referees. At that point, we also must realize that we cannot succeed in the absence of others.

The key for college teachers is to recognize that help may lie right around the corner, in the form of one of our “brothers and sisters of the chalk”—if you'll allow a reference that dates me. Most of our colleagues will never teach alongside us in the classroom, but

they influence us. Our student interaction often is a solitary act on our part, but think of that classroom contact or private conference moment as one piece in a process that already has involved colleagues, mentors, and friends.

How can I learn about and employ learning principles in my course?

The interdisciplinary learning sciences can help us understand how elements of our courses and our practices contribute to student learning, in any subject area. I draw mostly from social aspects of learning theory, but teachers can learn from colleagues in other departments and from reading in the growing field of learning sciences.



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