How I Learned to Love Teaching Behavior Analysis

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My introduction to teaching began on a hot September morning in 1961. I was a freshman at Arizona State University and was in Jack Michael's undergraduate honors class along with 20 other students who were new to behavior analysis. It was the "first day of the rest of my life" and I had no idea where this was going. Jack had a very flexible teaching method. In those early days, he would stroll into class leading a small covey of graduate students who sat in the front row and appeared to simply continue a conversation that had begun back in his lab on the third floor of the Social Sciences Building. He was dressed casually in shorts and an untucked short-sleeved shirt, and he often had pigeon feathers in his hair. Despite this unusual sense of fashion or lack thereof, he commanded our attention with his rapid-fire lectures. Jack was enthralled with the work of one of his post-doctoral students, Ted Ayllon, who was completing a clinical internship at a mental hospital in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, Canada. Ted, it appeared, was in near constant contact with Jack via phone as they collaborated on what turned out to be THE pioneering research in the field that was then called behavior modification. Jack told riveting stories about the strange behaviors of psychiatric patients and how they could be modified by the simple use of discrete changes in the social and physical environment. He drew rough graphs on the chalkboard, talking excitedly as he showed rapid and dramatic changes in their behavior usually in just a few days. I was mesmerized by Jack's style of teaching. I felt like he was talking to me; he was witty, eccentric, and engaging and he delivered an inspiring message—this was going to be the next revolution in psychology and we could be a part of it. I could see myself as a "behavior modifier" someday. I was inspired and motivated, but apparently not up to his high standards—I got a B in the first class. I went on to work with

Jack Michael for the next 6 years and then to work under his first PhD student, Mont Wolf, at the University of Kansas.

Trial by Fire

When I started my job as a new faculty member at FSU in 1970, I discovered there was a trial-by-fire method of weeding out new assistant professors. I was assigned large lecture halls filled with sophomores in child psychology, adolescent psychology, and educational psychology (there were no courses in behavior analysis), and I had no idea how to teach these topics. By then, Jack had moved on to Western Michigan University where he invented a much more structured approach to teaching that leaned heavily on page-after-page of detailed study objectives and frequent quizzes. I contacted Jack and immediately adopted his new teaching methods for all of my undergraduate classes. Rather than spending all of the course time lecturing, I took class time to answer questions on the objectives and provide multiple opportunities for them to respond on "20-point quizzes." For some reason, no one objected although there was one tense meeting with the associate chair where I had to defend a rather skewed final grade distribution of about 80% A's and B's. One day in class, a student put up her hand tentatively and said, "I've heard you are doing some interesting research, why don't you talk about that?" At that point, I had some graduate students, and we were consulting in the schools providing tips for teachers on classroom management. Talking about the school-based research seemed appropriate for the educational psychology class, so I put together some transparencies and gave it a try. Surprisingly, it felt great to be describing our work rather than someone else's, and the students seemed to quite enjoy the classes and the respite from being quizzed so often. The undergrads had good questions that helped formulate improved research. Further, they began to express an interest in participating in the studies. I did not exactly realize it at the time, but I was being reinforced for teaching. It felt like I was back at Arizona State, minus the pigeon feathers. I had caught the teaching bug.

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Graduate Teaching

Over the next few years, I began attracting terrific graduate students and was successful in lobbying for an undergraduate course in behavior analysis as well as graduate courses in *Skinner's Theory of Behaviorism* and research methods in ABA. I taught these courses as seminars and was able to create a niche for myself as the resident behaviorist in the psychology department. I soon had nearly a dozen graduate students and virtually a department within the psychology department.

Aubrey Daniels Changes My Life

In 1986, when the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis decided to offer a mid-year conference, I was elected to organize it. After reading some articles about a new branch of ABA called Performance Management, I called its foremost proponent, Dr. Aubrey Daniels, to see if he would be willing to attend the FABA conference as our keynote speaker. Without hesitation, he agreed and this was the beginning of a life-changing event for me. After the conference, Aubrey said, "What are you going to do now?" "I'm headed back to Tallahassee" I responded. "No, I mean what are you going to do about teaching Performance Management?" I didn't have a good answer but by the time I got back to FSU I had an idea, I would offer an undergraduate Directed Individual Study course on PM and see what happened. Initially, there were four students who were interested, and we met in my office to discuss articles being published in *the Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*. Word spread and the next semester there were ten students. Before long, the associate chair of the department explained that this informal arrangement could not go on—I had to create an *actual* course. And so it was that *Behavior Analysis in Business and Industry* was born. The course quickly grew to 40 students per semester. When students began clamoring for more training on Performance Management, a second class was added, *Advanced Topics in Performance Management*. Then, an option was added for students to do a PM project with a local business in their second semester. This created buzz in the department and electrified the mostly senior students in the class. Finally, they could actually do something with their training other than taking notes and exams. Some of these students planned to take their new-found skills back to the family business, while others were intent on setting up their own consulting firms and some wanted to go on to graduate school. I benefited directly from the aforementioned "buzz" as excited students not only reported this was the best experience of their 4 years at FSU, but they also nominated me for teaching awards. The first of these was in 1990, 20 years after I started teaching, and culminated in a University Teaching award in 1998 and a University Undergraduate Teaching

Award in 2007, the year of my retirement. In retrospect, my teaching method was fundamentally a shaping model, and some would call it organic: Try something and see what happens, listen to the students, observe them closely and see what lights them up, and try something else. What began as a question from Aubrey ended up 20 years later as a "Track in Performance Management" that culminated in a full-day conference on campus, organized by the students, and open to the public. The seniors presented their research, and we invited speakers from business and industry to discuss how they used PM in their Fortune 500 companies. It was amazing and organic. It was marvelous.

Teaching Future Teachers

Somewhere in the early 1990s, I was asked by the department to take on the *Teaching of Psychology* graduate seminar. This had previously been taught by the lecture method, but I determined that this course should be more hands on. Graduate students from all areas of the department signed up and I assigned *them* to develop 10-min lectures for the general psychology course on their specialty areas. They would first give a presentation in one of our smaller seminars and then in the actual course with more than 200 students. This didn't go well. We were too easy with our feedback so the talks were not strong, and the presentations in the large group flopped. It then occurred to me to bring undergraduates, the real consumers, into the seminar and let them provide feedback directly to the graduate students. This worked great! The undergrads were not intimidated in the least, provided specific feedback, and made outstanding suggestions such as, "Talk to us, not the ceiling," "Give more examples," and finally, "Frankly, I don't like your preacher style." The course was a huge hit, and many of the grad students from social, cognitive, and developmental psych went on to win graduate teaching awards.

Doctoral Training

When I was at the University of Kansas, I was treated not as a student but rather a colleague by Jim Sherman, Barbara Etzel, Don Bushell, Keith Miller, Don Baer, and Todd Risley and especially by my mentor, Mont Wolf. When I started teaching at FSU, I wanted to recreate that atmosphere, and this represented the happiest years of my academic life. My first grad student, Brian Iwata, became my colleague when he stepped into my office in the late August 1970 and asked, "So, what do you do?" "It's a new field called applied behavior analysis..." I replied, and I was off and running. Brian reinforced all of my initial attempts at graduate training. I gave him books to read and he came back for more. I suggested general topics for research, and he followed up with his own unique spin. We

talked about data collection and he presented quality baseline data within 2 weeks. Brian and I met regularly in my office, and as I gathered more graduate students over the next few years, we moved to a larger conference room. The recreation of the “KU Experience” evolved into the Behavior Analysis Research Center. We all met every other Tuesday evening and each student presented their proposal or pilot data and everyone participated. To determine priority, I said, “Who has data? Okay, you go first.” Sometimes, the response was mild and at other times just mildly irritating when the arguments became intense, but overall, the vibe in the room on most Tuesday nights was just plain exciting; it felt like a new Golden Age of research and productivity; ideas were welcomed with high praise; talks were practiced before being presented at conferences and were shaped toward excellence. As the skills of the students evolved, I could sit and watch the action and not have to guide the discussion; it had a life of its own. Over a 38-year period, I graduated 63 PhDs who passed through that transforming space in which new students helped dissertation-level colleagues with their data collection, and master’s-level grads got ideas for their dissertations from those just finishing. *Research Meeting* was an event, a teaching event, a training opportunity, and a rite of passage that FSU ABA grads recreated over and over as they took on research and academic positions across the country and set up their own labs. I have been fortunate to meet many of the academic grandchildren that came from these distant labs, and they at-

tribute much of their success to the Research Meeting experience that their mentor had at FSU.

I Still Love Teaching

As I approached retirement in 2007, I was not sure exactly what I was going to do with myself. Then, an opportunity opened up. The Dean of the FSU Panama City Campus offered me a half-time teaching position in the Master’s Program in Applied Behavior Analysis (that I created in 1999 with Ellen Berler, Associate Chair of the FSU Psychology department). The plan was for me to teach one graduate course per semester. This was the perfect arrangement. It gave me a chance to stay engaged with the field; I get to interact with very sharp highly motivated students who want to become professional behavior analysts, and with a half-time position, I have plenty of time to work on other projects. I have never been asked about what it is about teaching that I love so much, but I think it has a lot to do with recreating that feeling I experienced that first day in Jack Michael’s class over 50 years ago. Behavior analysis is a wonderful, exciting, rapidly evolving field that has the power to solve important social problems and change the lives of the most-needy in our culture. Having the opportunity to help my students learn about applied behavior analysis the way I did gives me goosebumps. And I mean that in a good way.