

# Luck Has Always Been On My Side!

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It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to write about teaching. It has been part of my life since my earliest memories when I would gather the neighbors and “play school”. Ironically I was not a high achiever in school in terms of grades. I was much more interested in playing. Perhaps I found the right discipline for myself- I still play and I still teach! It is indeed an honor to be recognized for teaching by one’s professional peers and I want to thank the selection committee and SPRE for this honor. I also want to note that as I was reviewing what others have written for this invited commentary I read Jane Kaufman Broida’s and Gay Carpenter’s essays. It is ironic that we three share a common educational experience — Temple University. I bridged the tenure of the other two twenty years ago!

I have been called on to state my teaching philosophy often in the last few years. I am intrigued that some are interested in my style, motivation or values related to teaching. In an era when distance - and technology-based education seem to be in style I remain a low tech teacher who places emphasis on the process of teaching rather than fact-based knowledge. It is the idea that teaching is a process that has prompted me to test out (research) teacher effectiveness and the sub components of teacher effectiveness over the years. Mostly, however, I believe luck has been on my side in terms of experiences and opportunities.

## *Lucky to be alive!*

Let me say my very first lucky episode was being born into a family that was very traditional. Three boys and me, a father who worked his way up the corporate ladder and a mother who worked equally hard at being a professional volunteer. Her organizational skills still amaze me! We all belonged to scouts and since boy scouts were more interesting than girl scouts I found myself learning from my brothers and their friends as they passed through the ranks. We were encouraged to participate in sports as a way to integrate into new communities and rainy weekends were spent in museums or at a concert. Living mostly on the east coast going to New York City or Washington, DC occurred with some regularity and we were even part of the very first tri-corner hat tour in Williamsburg. We traveled from the seashore to the mountains annually to visit grandparents and relied on each other for stability. My father taught me about fractions and my mother taught me to diagram sentences.

*Luck at the end of a rainbow!*

I believe we are products of our own experiences and, therefore, recently I have been reading about education in American culture. I think I missed some of the effect perhaps because my family moved often, about every two years. I attended 10 different schools before graduating from high school. In retrospect this was lucky. Apparently, in the late 1950s and 1960s children were taught to obey, to believe, and to think according to the prevailing social dogmas. If you sat quietly, answered questions correctly and conformed you did well in school. Some might call it an anarchist approach to education. I quietly moved through the grades without much distinction. By age 12 I knew I would be a teacher.

*Dumb Luck!*

In the late 60s and early 70s amidst several great social movements public education came under attack. I was in college and unaware of many historic occurrences during this time. I knew that there were many issues, many protests, and many mini revolutions. I remained mostly a spectator fascinated by the excitement that surrounded any demonstration. Teachers went on strike and many new, open schools emerged. I remember reading Ivan Illich and John Holt in college and thinking how much sense their ideas made, but never seeing how it would be possible to integrate their ideas into a classroom. They were so student oriented — what a novel approach! Happily, my very first job was in an open school where learning was active and noisy. Often I found myself outside teaching in the pond or under pine trees. Children could contract for grades and work according to their own motivation and ability. I got to develop my own curriculum with no strings attached. We used a team approach for each student often huddling to compare progress or problems and then collectively trying to solve it. Little did I know that I was receiving a very important education. Lucky for me that I took the job that paid \$6500 a year — including coaching responsibilities.

*Luck is finding a four leaf clover!*

In was during this time that I discovered Kurt Hahn's writings about developing the whole person through the experience. The experience was not the end point, but rather a means to an end. Hahn was instrumental in the development of the Outward Bound movement. It is this basic idea that solidified my purpose in teaching. Activities in or out of the classroom become the means through which students discover who they are and how they can affect others. As I was reading about and studying Kurt Hahn and the Outward Bound movement my Master's advisor had me call Phyllis Ford to talk with her about outdoor education, and she encouraged me to attend an Outward Bound course. I took an educator's course in Maine and because it was so hard took another course the following year in Colorado. I became a more demanding teacher and also incorporated many OB ideas into my teaching. My initiation into adventure-based education turned

an interest into a continuing focal point for me personally and professionally. It also confused me and I became lost in new options. I lost my focus and, basically, felt burned out. I needed something that combined my evolving interests and abilities. I returned home and lived near my family. They told me I was too good for teaching and the business world would benefit from my presence. I was offered a number of management training opportunities, but working everyday for 10 days of vacation a year did not fit into any plan I could think of. Serendipity!

My next bit of luck occurred when Robert Crawford offered me the opportunity to work in Philadelphia as an NRPA National intern. I was the last one. It was a great experience and led me to my next experience which was with the Recreation and Leisure Studies program at Temple University. Because I had no formal education in recreation Mr. Crawford suggested that I take a few classes at night. At the end of my internship I pursued my doctorate under Charlie Hartsoe (the first NRPA Intern) who had arranged for me to work in the Student Services area on campus. I found co-curricular life rewarding and very interesting. Mostly, I gained insight into college student development. I spent eight years learning about the seedier side of college student life! How I value my time at Temple, working with grounded staff and with a very diverse student population. Indeed, luck was still on my side. After finishing my degree I continued to work in student services for several years. After some institutional reorganization I found myself at an NRPA conference, "sort of" looking for teaching opportunities so I could more easily combine my outdoor work with a work schedule.

### *Luck of the Irish!*

Perhaps my greatest bit of luck came when Jerry Jordan told me about an open position at Oklahoma State University. Oklahoma!!! Well, I came, I saw, I stayed. While I had never considered that Oklahoma would be where I would spend the majority of my career, I found a group of kindred souls who believed that students were part of the learning process and who also believed that by working together we could maximize our effectiveness. It continues to be that way at OSU despite a few changes to staff over the years. I have worked with several outdoor programs, such as the Wilderness Education Association, National Outdoor Leadership School, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Council on Outdoor Education (AAHPERD). Luck has been part of my historic wandering. During my life I have become interested in the teaching process and have investigated the literature about pedagogy.

### *Luck is a rabbit's foot!*

The relationships between variables which affect the teaching-learning process and student achievement have been a focus of contemporary educational research. Duncan and Biddie (1974) developed a model to categorize the areas observed in pedagogy which provide a useful framework for discussion of relationships between variables in the teach-

ing-learning process. These categories are:

1. *Presage variables* - characteristics of teachers that may be examined for their effects on the teaching process ( i.e., formative experiences, teacher training experience, and teacher properties).

2. *Context variables* - the conditions to which the teacher must adjust (i.e., characteristics of the environment, attitudes of the students, subject matter, and skill level of the students).

3. *Process variables* - the actual activities of classroom teaching- what teachers and students do (i.e., amount of time on tasks, how students respond to the teacher, teacher behavior such as feedback, cues for performance, directions, and evaluation).

4. *Product variables* - the outcome of teaching- those changes that come about in students as a result of their involvement in activities with teachers and other students (i.e., psychomotor skills, affective or cognitive abilities). These can be long or short term outcomes.

I am most interested in the process and product variables in teaching. There are some common conclusions that can be made if we review the research in these areas. We find that student achievement can be enhanced in the following ways:

- involving the student (conceptually or motorically) in an activity (i.e., time on task);
- working at an appropriate level of difficulty where skill and challenge are balanced;
- having strong management skills: an effective teacher is first an effective manager. These skills have been characterized in the following ways by Kounin (1977): a) ability to know what is going on and to target behavior accurately and with good timing; b) ability to give specific feedback on behavior; and, c) the ability to handle several things at once with a smooth uninterrupted flow of events. Combined effective management skills are called “withitness”. Management skills are necessary but not sufficient skills for effective teaching.
- actively monitoring student progress toward instructional goals and structured learning, especially in learning basic skills. Immediate and accurate feedback is a useful technique for this. This is often called direct instruction. Direct instruction means creating a relaxed environment and one which is task-oriented with a clear focus on goals.

*Luck of the draw*

The above mentioned conclusions infer that students are of high ability, motivated, sociable, and conforming. Even when I am facing a group that does not measure up to the aforementioned criteria I pretend that they are of high ability, motivated, sociable, and conforming. Self fulfilling prophecy does come into play for a teacher! I respect students for who they are and for the dreams they have— even if I privately think otherwise. Students also tend to demonstrate more task relevant behavior when methods of two-way communication are used. When content is other than basic skills, there is evidence that instruction that involves the learner is most effective. Regardless of the content or degree of student involvement in the learning process; task orientation, active teaching, clear goals and student accountability for learning are characteristics of good instruction.

*Lucky when it works!*

How do I measure up on task orientation, active teaching, clear goals, and student accountability for learning? How do I self-monitor for effective instruction?

1) *Goals* - every day before I go into class I try to think about how I want the students to leave class. Are there specific bits of information or skills to be mastered? Is there an attitude I want them to have? Do I want them confused and a little stressed so that change is possible? I truly believe it doesn't matter as long as there is a goal.

2) *Task orientation* - staying on task is difficult on many days. At least now I consciously get off track to tell a story or to relate a similar idea from another setting. By being conscious when I get off track it is easier and faster to get back on track. The idea of task orientation is directly related to goal setting. If we know what outcomes we want it is easier to stay focused and move the group in ways to get there.

3) *Active teaching* - to me this means listening to students in and out of the classroom to determine the day's pulse. Trying new ways to present ideas is important. For years I centered on what students did that was poor- centering on writing errors, mistakes on tests, etc. Now I still mark the errors, but I also try to tell students what to do to correct or avoid the mistake. Telling students what we want is much more difficult than punishing them for not performing to our standards! Most times it requires communicating in many different ways and on many different levels. I keep going until they get it! Most important is providing feedback that is clear and concise. I can be a mirror for each student so that they see and hear how they appear to others. No judgment is necessary.

4) *Student responsibility for learning* - Ultimately it is the student who either learns or does not learn. Occasionally we even engage the most stubborn of students for brief stints of time. I believe that students need to be responsible for learning and, therefore, need to feel free to challenge a comment, ask questions, or extend a lecture in a new

direction without fear of being chastised, ignored by the teacher, or worse, seen as an obnoxious learner. We need to teach them to value their own opinions as well as the opinions of others. It causes them to want to think.

To me there is not a lot of mystery in teaching— it seems simple enough. Look, listen and respond. There is certainly little mystery to what I do with students and how I do it in terms of technique. I work at meeting them where they are and then try to take them where they need to be or want to be. It is my job to remove the barriers to learning and, more importantly, to direct learning with clear goals, active teaching, clear feedback and placing the responsibility for learning where it belongs. Teaching is the favorite time of my day. I would be untruthful if I said everyday was a great day in the classroom, however, I recognize that I learn everyday regardless of my effectiveness. The students energize me and many have had profound influence on me as a person and as a teacher. I am indeed lucky in my life and grateful for all who have crossed my path. It is an honor to be categorized as an effective teacher. It is my desire to continue to learn from my students and for my students. Luck has always been on my side and with a little more luck...

### References

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