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Teaching After Retirement: The Pros and the Cons

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Abstract

Having enjoyed teaching during my active career, I continued to teach summer school following retirement. Self-observed sensory and cognitive impairments, although not mentioned by students in their evaluations, induced me to consider the pros and cons of continuing to teach. My hope is that this list of benefits and problems will be of assistance to other instructors approaching retirement.

Keywords

faculty development, retirement

With decreasing opportunities for defined benefit pensions, increased opportunities for phased retirement, and more faculty of the baby boom generation retiring, decisions as to further professional activity are becoming more critical (Freedman, 1999). The American Psychological Association has sponsored surveys and publications on retirement opportunities for psychologists (Chamberlin, 2004; Quails & Abeles, 2000; Schlossberg, 2004, 2009) but nothing specific to teaching. In the hopes that it will be of value to other psychology faculty approaching retirement, I will list the pros and cons as I found them of continuing to teach 10 years following retirement and after five decades of college teaching. I will restrict the discussion to teaching, although the same points may apply to other professional activities such as consulting and service to voluntary organizations (Mathews, 2013).

Although instructors should continually assess their teaching, doing so becomes more critical with advancing age. Consistent with the research literature on normal aging (Schaie & Willis, 2010), there may be a decline in sensory and cognitive abilities. We lose nouns and proper names and may have to move from the front into the student area of the classroom to hear questions and comments clearly, occasionally asking students to repeat what they said. We may not hear distinctly the audio/video materials shown in class, although students seem to have no problem. We must check and recheck all handouts and still make mistakes. We strive to avoid, although do not always succeed, citing examples and names unfamiliar to today's students.

Each December, I can apply to teach the following summer session. The decision has become increasingly difficult. Similar to most institutions, summer classes here are intense, with 10-week quarter courses compressed into 6 weeks. I started a list of the positive and negative aspects for me of summer school teaching. I recognize my situation differs from that of an impecunious young instructor with major family

responsibilities. My retirement income and Social Security provide a cushion that a young instructor likely lacks.

Enjoyable Aspects of Teaching Summer Session

1. The opportunity to share my skills and knowledge with bright young people of a different generation.
2. The intellectual challenge of updating my course materials throughout the year. I am always looking for pertinent articles and images.
3. A reason to stay current in my field, to find classroom activities, to read and catalog articles and book pages.
4. A reluctance to let go of 50 years of accumulated teaching experience, putting aside all that I have learned about interactions with students in and out of the classroom.
5. The chance to be a humane and caring instructor, probably a better teacher than I was as a younger research-driven faculty member and administrator.
6. Teaching helps me stay intellectually alert. I am bored much of the time when I am not teaching, and while teaching there is no time to be bored.
7. My teaching evaluations remain high. In 2012, I received an average rating of 4.6 on a 5-point scale both for my course and for me as an instructor. No student mentioned the self-observed cognitive infirmities. Apparently my compensatory mechanisms

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including PowerPoint® lecture outlines, many visuals, and moving closer to students asking questions succeed in masking my self-observed deficits. Course goals are clear. The course is viewed as well organized, and I am well prepared and, most of all, enthusiastic (4.8 on the 5-point scale).

8. If I were not teaching the course next summer, I doubt that someone better would be hired. There is some likelihood that the course would be taught by a person with less experience in the subject area. I would regard this as a loss for the students.
9. I am an experienced practitioner and advocate of action research (Bargal, 2012) that combines practice (i.e., action) with research and evaluation. Summer school provides an opportunity to teach and at the same time evaluate what I am doing and determine how well it works, and this includes trying out teaching innovations such as ungraded first-day diagnostic examinations, optional essays, and credit for class participation and office visits.
10. Although stipends were reduced by a third because of the state budget crunch, the extra income is welcome.

Less Enjoyable Aspects of Teaching Summer Session

1. Typing and proofreading multiple-choice exams and constructing the scoring keys. I would prefer to give essay exams but use multiple-choice questions because summer session has tight grading deadlines and, more significantly, because our students overwhelmingly prefer them, an unwelcome fact I established through survey research (Sommer & Sommer, 2009).
2. My inability to broaden classroom participation. The class has a Silent Majority whose names I will never learn during the 6-week summer session. Only a few students (<10% of the class) participate actively (Sommer & Sommer, 2007).
3. The unusual student population attending summer school, which includes an unknown (the administration does not share this information) but apparently not insignificant number of students who failed out of school and are trying to re-enroll. They tell me they “need a solid B” to be readmitted. Having failed courses during the previous year, achieving a “solid B” is not easy for them, given the demanding 6-week pace in a summer term full of distractions.
4. Deciding on the cutoff points for letter grades. For reasons not clear to me, the “whine factor” appears to have increased, especially for students on the border between B+ and A– (Davidson, 2013; Roosevelt, 2009; Schlesinger, 2009).
5. I do not agree with the current grade inflation. I never considered myself to be a harsh grader, but I am unwilling to come even close to the percentage of A grades being given in many schools across the nation (Jaschik,

2011; Rojstacze, 2004; Slavov, 2013). Yet, I realize that students may feel penalized by my adherence to grading standards of another generation.

6. Concern that my teaching methods are outmoded. I have been sage on the stage for more than 50 years, lecturing and asking for comments or questions several times per hour. The emphasis today is on active learning and “flipped classrooms,” with students exploring topics on their own and, in collaboration with others in the class, completing projects and writing reports, not simply regurgitating lecture and textbook material. I feel it is too late for me to radically alter my course format.
7. I am a relic of the print age. I am not computer illiterate, but I know nothing about the latest technologies or understand the educational jargon accompanying them, such as Starfish, Moodle, Udacity, or 2tor. Although I am a daily reader of the educational blog *Inside Higher Ed*, I skip the articles concerned with Learning Management Systems and do not belong to a social network. I am a regular user of PowerPoint but do not know how to add video or film clips to my static images. When I attempted this, it was a fiasco. Even worse, I feel helpless using online administrative procedures, such as borrowing books through interlibrary loan or ordering textbooks from the bookstore. I am confused as to how to download the test bank CD supplied by the publisher of the textbook I am trying to order online. Last quarter, I asked for assistance in turn from (a) my wife; (b) the publisher’s representative; (c) the publisher’s information technology person; and (d) the department secretary. These issues have become an ongoing hassle. I do wonder whether younger instructors have this problem.
8. I worry as to how my undergraduate students, most of whom will have significant loan debt and liberal arts degrees, will fare in this economy. If I were not teaching, I would feel less responsibility for their future.
9. I am increasingly concerned about my deteriorating sensory and mental abilities. My ability to project my voice without a microphone has diminished. My memory is like a sieve. My hearing is not good, and I keep asking others to repeat what they say. I think they should be speaking louder, although I know that the problem is mine, especially because I miss lines in movies, plays, and song lyrics.

Decision Matrix

Although this balance sheet of perceived advantages and disadvantages was begun several years ago, the decision has become no easier. Some of the attractions, such as having a structured activity and avoiding boredom, seem selfish. Teaching another year will take work from an adjunct or graduate student who needs the income more than I. Yet, I can bring to the class accumulated experience and a strong research record in the subject area.

In the 10 years since retirement, the self-observed cognitive deficits have worsened. I use the term “self-observed” because no students mentioned them on their teaching evaluations. I find this to be a noteworthy point for retirees who may be excessively sensitive about minor slips that other people don’t notice. Still it is time for me to move on, with a successful career intact. Although I will remain professionally active reviewing articles for multiple journals, 2013 was the last year of my summer school teaching.

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