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# THE GENERALIST'S CORNER

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## Still Crazy About Teaching After All These Years: An Interview With Dick Gorman

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Richard Gorman received his BA in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame and his PhD in educational psychology from Fordham University. Over the years, he has taught at several colleges and universities—both in the east and west—and is currently a member of the Psychology Department at Central New Mexico Community College. He has taught courses in developmental, educational, and cognitive psychology, but is currently concentrating on the introductory psychology course. His publications include a text in the psychology of classroom learning, an introduction to Piaget's theory for teachers, and, more recently, an introductory psychology text. He has given presentations and workshops on discovery learning to various audiences including the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP).

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Burke: One of the reasons why I wanted to interview you is that you are still working hard and enjoying it at a time when most people would have long since retired. My first question is: Why? What maintains your interest and vitality?

Gorman: I just love to teach, to interact with students, and to help them become aware of a field that



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offers so much toward an understanding of themselves and others. And I've been blessed with good health—I don't have to take any medicine, so I just keep going! As I look back, one reason for my current involvement is that I was out of teaching for a while as I published a monthly magazine on what was going on in Albuquerque. It made me realize how much more satisfying teaching was than publishing as a profession. So when the opportunity came up 15 years ago to get back into teaching, I jumped at it.

Burke: What have been some of the adjustments you have made as you've grown older as a teacher?

Gorman: I knew right away that a full-time position was not for me at my age, so I have been teaching three classes a term rather than the usual five required of full timers at a community college. And now for the past year or so I've basically cut back to two classes in the fall and spring and take the summers off. Another adjustment I have made is to opt for late afternoon or evening classes where you get an older, more mature group of students for the most part—so I do not have to face classes full of freshmen just out of high school, which can be more demanding.

Burke: Over the years, how have your students changed and how have you adapted to these changes?

Gorman: The one difference I've noted is what seems to be a little less respect for the instructor than when I taught at the university level years ago. Many students engage in private conversations, read their textbook, or try to finish their assignments during class. It used to bother me enough to call students on it, but now I put it into the syllabus that these activities will result in no credit for participation or attendance, so the students will be losing points toward their final grade for the course. In other words, rather than getting upset, I now leave it up to the students either to participate or lose their participation points for that day.

Another difference between a couple of decades ago and today is the tendency for students to rely on the Internet rather than on the library when writing papers. In my introductory course, I've given up on topic papers and now have students write analyses of learning and personality theorists based on primary sources that I supply to them. In addition, instead of papers, I have them do actual surveys on attitudes, relationships, and other social psychology topics. This strategy has two desirable outcomes: It eliminates students copying articles from the Internet and also gets them involved in their own manageable research projects.

Burke: How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

Gorman: I try to be a facilitator of learning for my students. Because learning takes place in their minds, I involve them actively in the process in all kinds of ways. Basically I try to follow what is termed "the order of learning," in which you start with a problem or question, then have the learners do some experiential, experimental, or discussion-type activities, and finally arrive at a conclusion. Note that this process is just the opposite of the order of knowledge followed in most lectures and textbooks, in which information is presented in an orderly way while the students attempt to absorb it passively. In the same vein, rather than an *operative* artist—like a physician who tells people what they need to know—I consider myself more of a *co-operative* artist—like a farmer who helps his crops grow.

Burke: How did you become a cognitive psychologist?

Gorman: Looking back, I can think of at least three things that influenced me. First, my college major was philosophy, which included courses in epistemology and philosophical psychology, and I never took a more traditional behavioral psychology course. Second, my graduate major was educational psychology, which deals directly with human learning rather than simply applying aspects of animal learning to human learning as many behaviorists had done. Third, and perhaps most significant, was my early discovery of the work of Jean Piaget in the 1960s, not just his developmental theory but also his analysis of the acquisition of knowledge—human learning.

Burke: You mentioned philosophical psychology. How do you incorporate it into your classes?

Gorman: Philosophical psychology deals broadly with some general questions about the nature of humanity and the acquisition of knowledge. The "nature of humanity" question—whether the human is a unified or a more dualistic being—is of particular interest today given recent findings in neuropsychology. Aristotle and Aquinas opted for the unified view while Plato and Descartes held that mind and body were quite distinct. In the past decade, the hundreds of fMRI and PET scans of our thought processes seem to support a unified mind–body or mind–brain view much more than the once widely held dualist position.

Burke: What about how we acquire knowledge?

Gorman: Aristotle's analysis would lead anyone straight into the modern cognitive camp. Aristotle (1984) was both structural and functional in

his analysis: Structurally, he distinguished three main types of knowledge (theory/explanatory, practical/applied, and creative/productive), while functionally he charted the process from sensation/perception to abstraction of common aspects, resulting in the formation of a concept and then progressing to ordered knowledge and understanding. The British Associationists selected a couple of items (similarity, contiguity) from Aristotle's work in support of their theory, but his analysis was much broader and to me more satisfying than that. Both he and Aquinas (who followed him) emphasized an active intellect in the acquisition of knowledge. For instance, in a little known section of one of Aquinas's (1949) works, there is an interesting discussion of learning and teaching, in which he delineates the acquisition of knowledge as a discovery process rather than a pouring in of knowledge by a teacher. This view clearly supports a "guided discovery" approach to teaching, which describes my teaching style as much as anything else does.

Burke: What else have you gleaned from philosophical psychology?

Gorman: Several older philosophers have distinguished act versus potential, but it was my study of the existentialists that drove the notion home most clearly. Their "existence precedes essence" is carried out in practice when we make ourselves as fully human as possible. My favorite existentialist is Ortega y Gasset (1958), who stressed the need to make ourselves genuine, unified individuals with our own convictions—an emphasis that leads directly to Maslow's humanist position in psychology with its focus on self-actualization.

Burke: You are an expert on Piagetian theory and educational psychology. What are the take-home messages from these fields that could help psychology teachers?

Gorman: Thanks for the laugh when you mentioned me as an expert in these areas! It's more that I have delved into certain topics more than some of my colleagues, just as they know more about other areas than I do. The areas you ask about are very closely related. Today, educational psychology is almost totally cognitive in its approach to learning, as shown in both the articles in its journals and the current textbooks in the field. Almost every teacher nowadays knows something about Piaget's analysis of the development of thought processes, but relatively few seem to be familiar with the other half of his work—how knowledge is acquired—as delin-

eated in works such as *Biology and Knowledge* (Piaget, 1971) or *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures* (Piaget, 1975/1985).

The most obvious application for teachers of psychology is to realize that human learning involves much more than is included in practically all introductory psychology textbooks. Most human learning involves concept formation, relations, and ordered knowledge—cognitive structures in Piaget's terms. We learn to respond to signals (as in Pavlov) and we learn to behave in certain ways (as in Skinner), but most of our learning, both inside and outside of school, is on a much higher level than these forms of learning. One cognitive psychologist told me at a conference that he first asks his students directly what they expect to get out of the learning chapter—students fail to mention rats and mazes, but rather mention such things as what is the best way to learn about psychology and how to apply these concepts to their other academic courses.

A related suggestion I picked up at a recent conference that refers to Piaget's cognitive structure concept is to have students construct a hierarchical classification schema of the field of psychology, going from the most general (philosophical and scientific) to subgeneral (basic and applied) and then to the various subfields under each category. You can also get students to do a similar schema in whatever their major field happens to be.

Burke: In terms of educational philosophy, there seem to be four main camps: The Essentialists, who stress the importance of teaching specific content and basic skills; the Progressivists (e.g., Dewey), with their emphasis on discovery and problem-based learning as well as the social context of school; the Existentialists, who focus on the role of education in making students fully human and enriching their self-understanding and self-expression; and the Behaviorists (e.g., Skinner), who believe in a structured classroom experience with ample opportunity for rewards and punishments. Which of these positions do you rely on most heavily in your teaching and why?

Gorman: I respect the fact that there are important insights into a person's thinking and behavior that must be stressed in psychology, as an Essentialist would emphasize. I also believe that these insights enrich individuals' understanding of themselves and encourage them to become more fulfilled as the Existentialists desire. But for the most part I am a convert to Dewey's Progressivist emphasis on

active, experiential learning within a social context. His learning by doing and involvement is similar to my guided discovery approach. The continual interaction and sharing among my students through the many group activities we do is very much in line with the social emphasis in Dewey's philosophy of education.

Burke: You like to teach in a highly interactive manner, yet you do not rely on technology. How did you arrive at this style of teaching?

Gorman: In general, my teaching style follows directly from Piaget's emphasis on learning as an interactive mental operation in which we construct our own ordered knowledge of a topic. I strive to activate my students, both physically and mentally, through my discovery-oriented approach to teaching. Toward this end, I have gathered dozens of excellent student-centered activities by going through the past two or three decades of *Teaching of Psychology (ToP)*. This journal is truly a gold mine for discovery-oriented teaching activities that can be easily employed with or without technology.

Burke: Do you have a favorite example you might share with us?

Gorman: That's tough, because in almost every issue of *ToP* there is something useful for improving your teaching. As I told you earlier, for many years I have used inductive/guided discovery approaches to teaching. A few years ago, there was an excellent article in *ToP* on having students put together all the main topics of a chapter in a concept map as a review (Jacobs-Lawson & Hershey, 2002). I now use this exercise for practically all the main topics. For instance, for the memory chapter, I give students a list of about 40 items and have groups of three students put them into a concept map or schema using categories such as "helps" and "limitations to" sensory, short-term, and long-term memory. This exercise ties together the many inductive/experiential activities of the week through a more deductive/review approach to the chapter topics.

Burke: Can you share any other highlights that you have gleaned from *ToP*?

Gorman: For the introductory course there are so many! For instance, one author (Krauss, 1999) suggested a children's puzzle for students to complete while the teacher asks them specific questions about their tasks (e.g., "What is your group doing?" or "Is there anything going on in your mind?" or "Did you work together on it?"). This exercise is

an effective way to introduce and illuminate the various perspectives in psychology—behavioral, cognitive, social, and neuropsychological. For the biology chapter, Daniels (1979) recommended that students model a brain out of clay (or Play-Doh) and then label the specific lobes and structures. My students, especially the artistic ones, love this activity! For the learning chapter, having students taste lemonade powder in small cups is a way of experiencing classical conditioning (Cogan & Cogan, 1984). For the development chapter, one author suggested having students construct a model in order to showcase important aspects of Piaget's approach to learning (Nichols, 2002). Literally dozens of exercises for teaching about memory may be found in *ToP*, such as demonstrating the factors in long-term memory using the names of the seven dwarfs (Miserandino, 1991). Of the several checklists and other exercises for the personality chapter, I like the short cases or film character references that spark a lively discussion of Erikson's stages of personal social development (e.g., Bryan, 1988). Finally, for social psychology, there is a wealth of suggestions regarding cognitive dissonance, prejudice, conformity, and other topics. Hopefully these highlights will give you some idea of what is available from this gold mine.

Burke: You mentioned having students construct a model to illustrate Piaget's theory. How does that work?

Gorman: The purpose of this exercise is to help students gain a deeper understanding of Piaget's theory of learning, specifically assimilation and accommodation. Actually, what I did was adapt the idea in a different context (a city) for basically the same purpose. I first have each student write down some of the things necessary for a city to develop, then have them share their ideas in groups of three or four students, and finally have each group share their ideas about city with the whole class while I am clustering their points around the core of "city" on the blackboard. As students take in their colleagues' points and form a schema of city, they are experiencing assimilation. As they agree that their schema fits reality, they are experiencing accommodation. In addition, as their awareness of what is necessary for city to develop has increased at each stage of the activity, they learn about equilibration.

Burke: What made you decide to author a textbook and start a new conference at your age?

Gorman: Regarding the textbook (Gorman, 2002), I thought there was room for a more cognitive and

experiential introductory text than the more behavioral and expository texts currently on the market. The world was not waiting for it, but it has been used in a few community colleges and university branches both here and in California. It was just something I thought should be done—almost like, as a colleague of mine put it, a “God-given mission.” Regarding the conference, Doug Bernstein was attempting to launch a series of regional teaching of psychology conferences last year, and he knew me because I had been on the faculty of NITOP ([www.nitop.org](http://www.nitop.org)). Given my long-held conviction about active learning, I thought a regional conference would be a great opportunity to expose interested faculty and graduate students to various innovative approaches to teaching psychology—so the Mountain States Conference on the Teaching of Psychology was born (see <http://psychteach.nmsu.edu>).

As far as the “at your age” that you mentioned, I am indeed a septuagenarian and have recently “cut back” to teaching merely two or sometimes three classes each semester. I feel that I have to stay alive mentally through teaching and writing. Physically, I play tennis a couple of times a week much of the year in sunny Albuquerque and then play on the senior circuit in Europe during the summer.

Burke: What is this “senior circuit” that you are referring to?

Gorman: The senior circuit of tennis tournaments is offered for players from age 45 to 85 in 5-year increments, so you always play against someone in your own age group. I don’t play in the tournaments held in the United States because they are usually held during the school year. But I love to play in the European tournaments in summer—mainly on red clay, but sometimes even on the green grasses of England. You can plan a nice 6-week circuit of tournaments in Italy, Austria, the Czech Republic, and other countries. I’ve been doing this for a dozen years or so, and I have friends in many countries in Europe and also among the many Americans who go over and play in these European tournaments on a regular basis.

Burke: What advice do you have for someone who wants to author a textbook?

Gorman: First, you should have an approach in mind that is a little different from the dozens currently on the market. Second, you have to be sufficiently motivated to spend the year or two it will take to write it. One senior marketing representative of a leading publisher told me that you have about a 1 in 25 chance of getting a major publisher to take it on.

When I was writing in the 1970s, there were two dozen or more college publishers; today, however, there are just five or six major publishers, and they each have a half-dozen or more introductory texts already. The dozen or so smaller houses that might accept your work do not have representatives to market a text at colleges and universities the way the larger publishers do, and it is a major limitation in terms of financial reward. Basically, unless your text gets picked up by a major publisher, you will have to find a way to do most of the marketing yourself—which is difficult, but not impossible. Nevertheless, doing the necessary research required in writing a textbook will certainly make you more knowledgeable in your field—and therefore may even make you a better teacher.

Burke: What advice do you have for someone who wants to start a regional teaching of psychology conference?

Gorman: Although it involves a substantial investment of time and effort to start and run a conference, the impact it can make on those who attend will be very satisfying. Initially, you would want to involve two or three colleagues in planning the focus, format, and topics of a conference. The Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology (OTRP, [www.lemoyne.edu/OTRP/index.html](http://www.lemoyne.edu/OTRP/index.html)) will also provide some suggestions about these sorts of things as well as budgetary concerns and follow-up to help you get started.

I recommend that you get several well-known speakers rather than just one as in some conferences. Textbook authors usually can get their airfare paid by their publisher. In terms of format, participants seem to prefer interactive workshops and roundtable discussions rather than solely lecture-type presentations. Although you still want to include university faculty in your mailings, you will find that most of those interested in attending such a conference tend to be from smaller colleges and community colleges. If anyone is interested in putting on a conference, I would be glad to send them an outline of a presentation on this topic I gave at NITOP in 2006.

Burke: What was the focus of your conference last year?

Gorman: In a 2-day conference, you have to choose between one of two formats: either spending time equally on recent developments in the field and on different approaches to teaching (as is generally done at NITOP) or focusing instead more squarely on innovative approaches to teaching. Our conference emphasized innovative approaches to teaching the introductory course plus the fields

of developmental, abnormal, and neuropsychology. The unique thing about our conference was its overall emphasis on active learning. Even the keynote speakers provided concrete examples of active learning. For instance, everyone got a sip of tea that noticeably affected their taste perception, and participants also witnessed a clever extrasensory-type experience that called for critical thinking regarding alternative explanations for what we witnessed. The smaller workshops featured a variety of hands-on and team-based activities plus a different theme approach to teaching the introductory, developmental, and abnormal courses. The several roundtable discussions ranged from dealing with difficult students to incorporating service learning into various courses.

Burke: What's your favorite course to teach and why?

Gorman: It's definitely the introductory course for several reasons. First, it includes the fantastic breakthroughs in the study of the brain that have been occurring over the last couple of decades. Second, it spans a great variety of topics, practically the whole field of psychology. Third, it covers many areas in which students are very interested, such as personality, psychological disorders, emotion, and stress and health.

Burke: Which breakthroughs in brain research most excite you?

Gorman: Although I am far from being a cognitive neuroscientist, I love exploring the patterns of brain activity that have been identified through PET and fMRI research in the past decade. If I had to choose, I would certainly include the studies on the formation of cognitive structures that have implicated the prefrontal cortex and several other areas might be involved in this process (e.g., Fletcher, Büchel, & Josephs, 1999). Another breakthrough would be the work on skill learning revealing that the prefrontal cortex is involved when one is learning a skill, but that once the skill has been mastered, its mental model is centered in the parietal area (Shadmehr & Holcomb, 1997).

Burke: Some students find the brain and nervous system difficult topics to grasp. How do you make brain science understandable to them?

Gorman: This challenge is the most enjoyable part of the introductory course for me—and again, to a large extent, I have *ToP* to thank for helping me teach students about it. My approach is both structural and functional. I begin by asking about a student's day, from waking up to getting ready for class or work, then to what he or she does in class, and

finally to late evening. I chart each activity they mention on the appropriate part of the brain and nervous system, slipping in some of the names of structures, and maybe even a reference to the Greek or Latin terms from which they are derived. I'm a holistic type of guy, and so I begin with the brain rather than the neuron when I teach the nervous system.

The next class session is purely hands-on. I get students into small groups and give each student a slab of modeling clay (as I mentioned earlier) plus labels for a dozen lobes and structures. Each student creates a model of one brain hemisphere, labeling the lobes prior to making the several inner structures and labeling them. A take-home quiz brings them back to the functions of each structure they have labeled. Through a variety of short cases and vignettes that students analyze using the neuroanatomy information they previously learned (Sheldon, 2000), everything is again linked to both structure and function, including neurons, neurotransmitters, and diseases.

Burke: How do you bring your own enthusiasm and interests (music, sports, travel) into the classroom?

Gorman: I really haven't thought of bringing enthusiasm into the classroom. But now that you mention it, I rarely stand still, I use a lot of visuals, and I usually have a couple of activities for students to do in every class, which provides constant interaction between us—and sometimes some good laughs. Occasionally there are opportunities to incorporate some of my interests in order to make what we are covering more practical or clearer for the students. A few examples that I can think of are singing part of a country-western song to show the unity in brain activity (I used to conduct choirs) and using baseball in short cases or vignettes to exemplify brain activity and certain aspects of learning and social psychology (I used to play semipro baseball).

Burke: What do you want your students to come away with from your courses?

Gorman: I'd like them to gain not only an understanding of the important topics and issues of the field of psychology, but more important, an increased awareness of themselves as persons with varied abilities, desires, emotions, and motivations. I would also hope that they gain an increased understanding of how and why others behave as they do, and how much of what is covered in the course can be applied to their own lives, their relationships, and their chosen professions.

Burke: What specific parts of psychology do you think can be most easily applied to students' lives?

Gorman: This question raises an important consideration, especially for the introductory course. What I do first, using yet another nugget from *ToP* (Miller & Gentile, 1998), is to give my students a list of 10 specific questions on why they are taking the course. The top reasons they give in response to these questions always include how psychology can be used in society or a profession and how it can help them understand human behavior, both their own and that of others. Basic concepts, leading psychologists, learning skills, and even developing critical thinking skills are often mentioned but are usually well down the list in terms of importance to the students. So I know right from the start that students want the course to be applicable to their lives.

Most chapters of the introductory course can be applied to students' lives: Motivation, emotion, stress and health, disorders and therapy, and, of course, social psychology all have various subtopics that pertain directly to our students. However, in my view, it is the coverage of personality that offers the best chance for applying concepts to students' lives: Discussing trait dimensions, hierarchy of needs, and defense mechanisms all have value in improving our understanding of ourselves and others.

Burke: What are some of the high points of your career to this point?

Gorman: The main high point has been the former students of mine who have told me that my course helped them decide to major in psychology with the idea of going into the field as a career. Other high points include having several publications see the light of day and being able to share my approach to hands-on learning in workshops and presentations, especially at NITOP.

Burke: What do you consider your most important piece of work and why?

Gorman: It's hard for me to say which is (or was) most important or had the most impact. A psychology of classroom learning text I did years ago (Gorman, 1974) was used for a while at several colleges, but not enough to do a second edition. A book on Piaget's theory for teachers (Gorman, 1972) was translated into Spanish and used in some South American universities, and the publisher had me do a lecture tour at several California colleges. But probably the most satisfying work is my introductory text (Gorman, 2002), which has been used at several colleges in California and New Mexico, because it gives teach-

ers a chance to use an introductory text that has a strong focus on modern cognitive research presented in an experiential (discovery-oriented) manner.

Burke: Your level of enthusiasm, work ethic, and accomplishment in the teaching of psychology are amazing for someone nearing 80 years of age. What tips do you have for other psychology teachers regarding growing old gracefully?

Gorman: Your statement is much more expansive than the reality! But anyway, here are a few suggestions for growing old gracefully as an academic. The first is not to think old; think experienced, knowledgeable, and wise. Second, use that wisdom to cut back to a couple of courses, but do not cut teaching out entirely. Teaching will keep you alive mentally and fill in your days with something you love to do. Third, pick up any slack in your day by keeping involved in the other activities in which you are interested, such as music, sports, travel, and the like. These activities will help to fill the hiatus you might feel as you cut back on your teaching. Another thing—try not to get discouraged by a decrease in word fluency that research shows occurs in many of us in our 70s. You know enough words to circumvent a word you can't recall by using other phrasing. And finally, add as many discovery and experiential techniques as possible to your teaching that will involve you with students. Your students will learn better, you will stay young and avoid burnout, and both you and your students will have fun!

Burke: Thank you so much for this enlightening and lively interview. You are truly an inspiring scholar and teacher of psychology.

Gorman: Brian, it's been both an interesting experience and a lot of fun doing this interview. I thank you very much for the opportunity to share all of these ideas with you.

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