Transcript

Episode 137

Our Teaching Persona in Anatomy & Physiology Class

The A&P Professor Podcast

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Contents

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Introduction

Kevin Patton (00:00):

Education pioneer John Dewey once wrote, to be playful and serious at the same time is possible and it defines the ideal mental condition.

Aileen Park (00:15):

Welcome to The A&P Professor, a few minutes to focus on teaching human anatomy and physiology with a veteran educator and teaching mentor, your host, Kevin Patton.

Kevin Patton (00:30):

In episode 136, I discussed topics related to the teaching persona that we project to our students.

Our Teaching Persona

Kevin Patton (00:47):

I was recently thinking about one particular aspect of my teaching persona, and I'll tell you about that in just a minute. But before I do, I want to review what I mean by a teaching persona. It first came up way back at the beginning, the olden days of this podcast, in episode 12, so that was like five years ago, and I did an episode that featured a segment on storytelling and why I think storytelling is a good way to think about what we do as instructors. Not only in what we might do in a lecture, a mini-lecture, a demo, a pre-lecture, something like that where we can really see ourselves as storytellers, but we're also storytellers when we're deciding how to build our course and what kinds of activities to do in our course, what kind of strategies to use in our course. It's all part of a story. We can storyboard those ideas.

(01:47):

So, that came up in episode 12. In that process, I was talking about the fact that professional storytellers, they adopt a persona, maybe more than one if they're actually acting out parts as part of the story. But if they're just telling the story, if they're just the teller of the tale, they might decide they want to be very dramatic or very active as they tell the story, or they may decide that they want to be very mysterious or maybe very low-key, or maybe they want to switch back and forth between being very energetic and very low-key. There's all kinds of possibilities, and it depends in part on the story and it depends on part on the storyteller themselves and how they've

developed that story and what their own personality is like. That's what I mean by persona. It's the personality that we're projecting in the classroom. It's not our entire personality, but it's aspects of our personality that we may be exaggerating or at least pulling to the front in that context. We could think of it also maybe in a more general way as our affect in the classroom. How do we come across in the classroom to students?

(02:57):

And that, by the way, is a very important part of the teaching persona or storytelling persona if we want to think of it that way, and that is how is it being received by students? About the only way that we can tell how it's being received by students is if they tell us. We need feedback, right? And sometimes I get some spontaneous feedback from my students. As a matter of fact, that happened just yesterday in a one-on-one I was having with one of my students, and he remarked about the playful aspect of my particular persona in the course that we just started about a week ago, that that really came across to him and he found it very engaging and helpful and was happy about it. Now, we could have students that tell us, "Hey, you're just being too playful here. This is distracting me." That could happen. It could be spontaneous like that, or sometimes we have to just ask them. We can do a poll. We can include that as a question on our end of course evaluation if we have the opportunity to do that. Or as I've mentioned in previous episodes, I like to do debriefings sometimes in the middle of the semester and at the end, sometimes just at the end of the semester and talk about, well, what worked for you? What didn't work for you? If I'm not getting any feedback on my teaching persona, then I might ask about that. How am I coming across? Do you feel like I'm supportive? Do you feel like I'm a kind teacher? Do you feel like I'm a rigorous teacher? Do you feel like I'm too energetic or not energetic enough? What's going on there? That's one aspect of the persona.

(04:34):

But I want to also get back to the playful aspect that I just mentioned in my own teaching persona, and that came up right after the storytelling persona came up in episode 12. The next episode was episode 13, which I'm now realizing is I see the number 13 in my notes here that maybe I should have skipped that. Isn't bad luck to have an episode 13? Don't they do that in hotels, skip the 13th floor when they're numbering the floors? I don't know if you want to go back to that one and listen to it because it might bring you bad luck. I'm just warning you.

(05:10):

But that one was focusing on this idea that being playful and serious at the same time is not only possible, as the quote from John Dewey at the beginning of this episode said, not only is that possible, it defines the ideal mental condition. I took that and applied

that to this idea of a storytelling persona that is a playful one, and that's something that I want to develop in my teaching persona. That's the kind of classroom I want to have is a playful classroom because we know that in a playful atmosphere, that's where we're more engaged. That's where we pay more attention. That's where we have more fun, and therefore things are more meaningful to us.

(05:54):

That's what I like, but I think there are other kinds of environments and teaching personae that we can use in the classroom besides the one I use. That's something that we each want to develop on our own and we each want to think about. When I say develop, that's the point I want to make today, and that is the reason I was recently thinking about it was I was thinking about a particular aspect of that teaching persona and whether I'm really living up to the ideal I've created for myself. I don't think we can expect that of ourselves anyway to always be 100% playful, 100% serious, 100% whatever it is we decide that we're going to be in our teaching persona. I mean, we can't do that 100%, and we certainly don't want to put our entire focus on that because then we lose the story. We lose the content of the story. We lose those concepts that we're trying to get our students to learn and to understand and be able to apply.

(06:56):

What I'm saying is is that we do need to think about it occasionally. Go back to it and maybe tune it up. In this case, it had to do with an aspect of the teaching persona that I like to project, and that is projecting the idea that I am a supportive instructor. That when I say to my students, "I got your back," I want to really mean it that I got their back, and I want to project the idea that I have their back. There's a lot of evidence that tells us that if students from the very beginning of the course feel like their instructor is supportive and really does have their back and will help them when the time comes to help them, then they're going to do better in that course, at least as a group they're going to do better. Probably every single individual in there is going to do a little bit better than they otherwise would have knowing that.

(07:51):

Now, we know based on our experience that not every student, as a matter of fact, the majority of students are not going to call on us for help for a variety of reasons. But if they truly believe that we're willing to help them, then they're going to benefit from that aspect of the teaching persona that I'm trying to project in the classroom. The reason it came up is I was getting a little annoyed with some students who needed lots of help, and the stuff they needed help with was stuff that, well, yeah, I can see how that could create an obstacle. You would want a little bit of coaching or at least somebody in your corner saying, "Yeah, you can do that. Let's do it together. I'm right here if you run into

any problems." I was thinking, oh man, this is just so annoying having them calling all the time and so on.

(08:48):

I don't usually think that, by the way. I usually relish that because I teach entirely online these days, and so I'm glad to have opportunities to have one-on-one interactions with my students. That surprised me for that reason too. But then I realized, hey, this is part of the kind of teacher that I want to be. Not just the kind of person I want to be, but the kind of teacher I want to be. Both of those are important I think in teaching, but it's more specific when we think about, well, what kind of teaching persona do I want to have in my classroom? I want to have a supportive persona. If I'm brushing away some of these requests for my help right at the beginning of the course, that's going to affect those students who are at the receiving end of that. If they even get a hint of that going on in my brain, they're going to pull back and they're probably not going to ask me for help again even when they need help. That's not good, because not only can that affect them in the course and possibly affect their success in the course, but it can affect them in succeeding courses with other instructors who may be much more supportive than I am and they're just not given that benefit of the doubt because of the bad experience that student had with me. I think that carries on into their career and other places as well.

(10:11):

I think that a lot of times we don't think about that superpower that we have as educators, and it is a strong, strong superpower that we have in people's lives. The least little thing that we say to a student, especially if we're addressing them as an individual, can have a huge impact on the rest of their lives. Think about it for a minute. Think back to your early days of schooling, in grade school, in high school, and as an undergraduate, and then later as a graduate student. Think about those moments when something a teacher, an instructor, a faculty member, a mentor said to you that continues to have an impact on you today.

(11:01):

Just in this moment of really trying to focus on what I'm saying, but also trying to think back, I can think of several things that have been said to me over the years. Some of them have been wonderfully positive and continue to encourage me, and some of them have been horrible statements that were made to me that still affect me in a negative way to this day. I don't think they were meant as negative as they came across to me as I felt them as I received them, but they certainly weren't positive in any way.

(11:37):

That's something that we need to be careful of. We need to make sure that when we're having a bad day and we have them, that we don't let that carry through to our communication with students, especially to individual students, that we don't let it affect our teaching persona. Yeah, being tired and being frustrated with things, being upset with something going on in our life, maybe even in our professional life, maybe even with that particular student we're interacting with, but not let it come across because we as professionals are expected to step beyond that, at least in that moment because we want to be supportive. That is if we've adopted that attitude, which I think is something we all ought to weave into our teaching persona, but I certainly have adopted it in mind and I want to.

(12:28):

The context in which I was thinking about this was a case where I was letting things or was about to let things really affect the way I was going to be communicating with students. Beyond that, it's not just the way I could have come across had I not caught myself, the other thing is, is why are you frustrated at doing this? That's what I was asking myself. Because the thing is, is I don't just want to come across as supportive, I want to be supportive. I think that's what should be behind our teaching persona. It's not a facade, at least it shouldn't be a facade. It shouldn't be fake. It should be a projection of our real selves. It's just that we're emphasizing some parts of our real selves and putting them out there for students to see. That frustration is part of my real self too, but I think in a professional situation, I need to pull that back and really stick with those more positive parts of what's going on inside me with my student, because that's my role is to be a supporter of this student.

(13:41):

I can walk out of the classroom or step away from that Zoom meeting with a student or phone call with a student, and then I can vent to my pets or to the walls or to the books around me and so on. I can do that, but that's not something I want to do with an individual student. Yeah, I think that this teaching persona really is who we should be. We should decide who are we going to be as teachers and then work on projecting that. That's what I mean by teaching persona. I have a few other aspects of the teaching persona that I'll get to in some of the other segments of this episode.

Taking Responsibility

Kevin Patton (14:23):

I want to spend just a moment longer thinking about that supportive aspect of what our teaching persona might be like. Something that I stated I already value in my own teaching persona, the kind of teacher that I want to be is a supportive teacher. For many years, I don't know, maybe it was decades, I thought that it's best to let students be responsible for getting their own needs met. That is, I figured if I made myself available, that was enough. But you know what? That's based on my own experience as a student and it's based on my own way of thinking. We know that there is diversity among our students. They're not all young little Kevins who do things the way Kevin always did.

(15:19):

Well, first of all, the context is different. Things are different now than they were when I was a young student, and so who knows how I would've been? Because the culture has changed, society has changed, schools have changed, the way we do teaching and learning has changed. Yeah, we can't just base it on our own way of thinking or the way that we did it or what our attitude might have been when we were in that student or this student's situation.

(15:49):

Now, after years of thinking, okay, if the students need help, they're going to come to me for help, I eventually learned that to be inclusive, I have to consider the fact that not everyone knows that they can and should make direct contact with a professor to sort out what their needs and goals are. For example, many, not all, but many students from historically disadvantaged communities do not know that they should be approaching their professor for help. Even if they've been told that they should approach their instructors, many of these students have cultural perspectives that could block them from doing so, a hurdle they just can't get themselves over.

(16:43):

Approaching authority figures isn't always seen as being effective and is seen as something that could turn out very badly. Now, me being an older white man as their professor, that might make it even harder for some of those students, and it may

reinforce those barriers that they have to coming to approach me. Sometimes females have hesitancy or outright fear about approaching a male instructor like myself, or vice versa, one-on-one or possibly even in a small group. Many students on the autism spectrum or with other so-called invisible challenges will not reveal that to instructors. In other words, their challenges remain invisible to the instructor, so they don't know that these students are challenged. Some of those students, depending on the kind of challenge they have, simply will not approach instructors when they need help.

(17:50):

I've dealt with some students that are like that. I know some students that are that very well. It doesn't fit with my way of thinking, so it's hard for me to imagine that this is so hard for them to do that, but it is, and I'm just going to have to trust that it is for them. It's like jumping off a cliff as far as they're concerned, and I just don't see that. I can't see that, but that's how it is for them, at least some of those students.

(18:22):

Even so-called responsible students, like I thought I was, benefit from instructors who keep tabs on them and reach out to the student when they're falling behind. As an undergraduate, I couldn't believe that my physics professor, Dr. Stacey, in a class of about 200 or so students, wrote me personal notes on some low scoring tests, even noticing my high rate of absences from his lectures, which back then was unusual because the professors didn't take roll call. They didn't record absences, but he noticed that I wasn't there for all of the classes. But when I became an instructor years later, I forgot how much that benefited me.

(19:14):

But eventually I got it. And now, I myself keep tabs in a way even in large courses and reach out to students who aren't keeping up. It turns out that it's not that difficult or time-consuming. I know it can be scary in a large class, even in a small class it can be scary. Oh my gosh, if I open myself up to this, all my time will be taken up by doing this. I've tried it and I've found that that is not usually true. I mean, there are little spurts sometimes where it seems a very heavy burden, but it's only heavy for a short time and not very often, at least, again, in my experience. But the thing is, it can really help turn around a student who might otherwise drop out of college entirely.

(20:07):

You know what? Even if it just helps one out of those 200 students, I'll take it. That's great. I've done my job if I help just one student by doing what I can to keep tabs on them. Of course, there are limits to what I can do, but I'm going to go ahead and do

what I can. If we want to project the idea that we want to have an inclusive course and that we're inclusive educators and that we have a supportive teaching persona, then I strongly suggest that we do not exclude students who may have barriers to taking responsibility in ways that our cultural biases have influenced our thinking.

(20:55):

Perhaps we should avoid those kind of statements, especially to prospective employers when we're interviewing or maybe going up for promotion and announce, "Well, I want my students to be responsible. I force them to be responsible. Students should be responsible." Well, yeah, we need to be careful about how we explain that because it could be taken as a not very supportive attitude. That may not be what we mean, but we need to think about how we're expressing that, and we need to think about how we are living that in the classroom as part of our classroom demeanor. Perhaps more importantly than the message we're sending to prospective employers or to a committee considering our promotion, probably the most important thing is to think about how it plays for students because that's who's going to be affected by our classroom persona.

Gestures Impart Meaning

Kevin Patton (22:03):

As I just mentioned, I've been thinking about my teaching persona. I've been thinking about those aspects of my personality, myself that I want to project to my students to make it a better experience for them and make it more likely that they're going to succeed. And as I've been thinking about that, I recently ran across an article that pulled together some results of recent and sometimes not so recent research about gestures as we're communicating with people that I think really plays into this idea of a classroom persona.

(22:40):

When I say classroom persona, I'm referring to classroom in the very general, broad, abstract, metaphorical sense. I don't necessarily mean being in a classroom doing a lecture. It could be in a classroom doing lots of things, having a discussion, doing a demonstration, being involved in active learning processes that are going on in the classroom. But it could be in a lab. It could be in a lecture hall. It could be online. It could be in the online environment. It could be asynchronous or synchronous. I'm just talking about communication in general within the confines of a course. Maybe I should use that term instead of classroom. But if I do use it, the classroom inadvertently, I mean course, some kind of a course environment. It could even be on a field trip, but that's part of the course. All right.

(23:37):

One of the things that we can do that research shows is helpful is use hand gestures when we speak. There's quite a bit of research actually that emphasizes that using hand gestures as we speak, as long as we're visible when we speak, obviously, but I use hand gestures. I'm using hand gestures right now and you can't see me, but I think it probably affects the way I'm communicating. I think if I just put my hands in my lap and kept them there the whole time, I don't think I would come across exactly the same way that I'm coming across now. I don't know, maybe there's been some research on that. Well, if you find some, let me know. That would be fascinating to read that. But the research that was mentioned in this article, which I will have linked in the show notes as I always do, it talks about the kinds of gestures that we can use when we're communicating, the kinds of hand gestures, but I think we can also extend that to body language in general too, right?

(24:39):

You may already know this about me that I have spent many years actively mentoring other A&P faculty, some of them new to teaching, some of them been teaching for quite a while. Not only do most of them not really think about their teaching persona much, if at all, until we have that conversation and then they do it a lot, but I think they don't really keep up with it as I'm encouraging us to do in this episode. I think that they leave on some things that they could be thinking about and that would include hand gestures.

(25:17):

There are many kinds of hand gestures. For example, there's something called beat gestures. That would be something like, oh, when you watch a band leader, for example, and you see that the band leader may be using their hand or even a baton to at least during some parts of the performance give a beat. They're using maybe just their finger and they're going down with every beat, first beat, second beat, third beat. We often do that as we speak, especially if there's a series of things that we want to emphasize. For example, in my course, we're always emphasizing the phrase practice, practice, practice. When it comes up in class, and I do try to find every opportunity to bring that in there because it's one of those playful things and it's also an important principle, right, is keep reminding our students that the only way to get better, the only way to really understand anything that we're doing in our course is to continue practice, retrieval practice, all kinds of different practice. Yeah, we use that phrase a lot, practice, practice, practice. I just caught myself now, I used a beat gesture. I just used my hand to on every time I said the word practice downbeat, downbeat, downbeat. We do that a lot. That might be something to think about and not hold ourselves back from that.

(26:39):

I think sometimes we don't want to get too gesturey, but really in live performance and in a sense that's what we're doing when we're communicating with students, whether it's a large group, a small group, or one-on-one, we are performing and we want to get our message across, and I think we need to exaggerate our gestures a little bit in those contexts. That's okay and that's probably way better than trying to hold them back. Think about beat gestures when you're teaching.

(27:15):

Another kind of gesture that we do that can be very helpful are gestures that show openness. Just turn on just about any TED Talk. Go to YouTube and find some TED Talks. There's a bajillion of them there, a bajillion and a half maybe. What you want to do is watch the gestures of the people who are speaking. Look for the ones that have a lot of downloads because those are going to be really popular ones, so you assume the speaker's really good. What you're going to see is that they immediately address the audience with their arms out and probably their palms facing toward the audience, because that is almost sort of like a group hug in a way, isn't it? It's a very open gesture that establishes a kind of connection with each and every audience member that we wouldn't get if we were just standing there with our arms down to our sides or our hands resting on the keyboard so that we can advance the next slide, or holding onto the side of a lectern, or holding onto a back of a chair or something.

(28:22):

Even if we're very informal and we think we're being open and we feel like we're being open, if we don't gesture openness and not just at the beginning, but watch the TED Talks and you'll see that throughout the talk, they continue to do that sort of thing. For many of those speakers, it's their go-to gesture. When they're not doing other kinds of gestures, like a downbeat, a beat gesture for practice, practice, practice, they go right back to that open arm gesture or something like it, their version of the open arm gesture. Try to find a comfortable open arm or other kind of open gesture that you can use in your communications with your students.

(29:04):

Another kind of gesture that would be in between those open gestures is making shapes with our hands. Don't we already do that a lot? I bet, if you're listening right now and you've taught A&P for any length of time, you've probably done that. Even as an A&P student I used to do that. And that is, if I'm talking about the eyeball, I sometimes will motion with my hands a ball in front of me. If I want to talk about the anterior of the eyeball, I'll use one hand and do a chopping motion next to my other hand that's curved to represent that ball that's still there, imaginary ball. That's like, okay, that's the

anterior, that's the front of the eyeball that I want to talk about. And then I can start talking about the iris or talking about the pupil and things like that. When I talk about the pupil, I might make a little circle with my fingers and show that I'm talking about a round opening when I talk about the pupil.

(30:05):

We do that a lot, don't we, with all kinds of structures in the body. But even when we're talking about processes in the body, we will often take our hands and make a downward motion when we talk about blood glucose level goes down in the circumstances or the blood glucose level we would expect to go up in this other circumstance. I'm doing it. Imagine me here sitting in my office looking at my notes here and I'm taking my hand and making a stepwise motion going up. I don't always use those steps, but when I'm thinking about physiological mechanisms, that's where my head goes right away is there's always a series of steps involved.

(30:49):

I recommend that we find clear gestures and we use them and exaggerate them. I think also we need to think about how our gestures fit along with what we're saying. If we're saying something unexpected, maybe we should use some gestures that underscore the fact that we understand that this is unexpected to hear from us, or if it's something that is the same old thing, practice, practice, practice, then maybe we have some gestures or body language that imparts that as well.

(31:26):

We need to think about gestures not only that we make with our hands and our whole body, but also gestures we make with our face. Human faces are very expressive, and so we need to maybe exaggerate some of those expressions a little bit to get our idea across even better to our students than if we're not. And as I say, even in a situation if you're only using audio like you would be on a phone call, or if you use audio, maybe podcasts or something, with your own students as part of your course, audio summaries of different concepts and so on, or audio reviews before an exam, you can do that and go ahead and make your gestures while you're doing that, just as I'm doing now with the podcast. Because as I say, I really think that does add to the efficiency of communication.

(32:19):

There's a link and there are some other information about gestures. I don't want to spoil all the fun, all the surprises you'll get when you read the article, but that'll get us started in thinking about gestures as part of our teaching persona.

Playing Around

Kevin Patton (32:34):

In an earlier segment, I was discussing playfulness as a potential aspect of our teaching persona, and I try to incorporate that in my own teaching persona because I think playfulness really does engage students more than not having a playful aspect to the teaching and learning atmosphere in a course.

(32:58):

But there is another aspect of playfulness that I want to circle back to for just a moment. I was reminded of it when I read a recent article in Times Higher Education about the value of play, not just playfulness, but actual play, playing in the university classroom. As matter of fact, the title of this piece is called Reimagining University Learning with Play. It's really a great essay. It's really worth reading, and I don't want to get into all of it here, and I certainly couldn't summarize it as well as it is written. It's written by an English composition professor, so no wonder it's so well-written. Anyway, what it gets into a lot and what I want to bring up here is two big things.

(33:55):

One is it's really important to remember that what play is in nature, and we know that not only humans play, but animals play too. I learned this firsthand with my work very early in my career as a zookeeper and wild animal trainer, and that included spending some time as an apprentice lion tamer. Many people don't realize how lion taming is done, not that we're actually taming of the lion anyway. It's lion training. They don't realize how it's done. The usual method, as like any kind of teaching, there are a variety of different methods that different people use, but there's a lot of similarity. Most people, most that are working at the same time that are contemporaries of each other are using very similar techniques. That is true in lion taming as well.

(34:54):

These days, and actually for a long time now, the usual approach to lion taming is using play. This is true for training other wild animals and even domestic animals too, depending on the kind of training that you want to do. But it's typical in training big cats that you would let your lions and tigers play with each other and with you and with various props and equipment and so on. One thing that we would do is bring our animals in, let them play around in the performance arena. There might be a big globe that one of the tigers has learned to walk on and some young lions may climb on it and think that's a lot of fun.

(35:36):

It's hard to do. It's hard even for a cat to balance on a ball and walk it along the ground, and yet we had a lion that taught himself how to do that. Why? By playing. He thought it was a great game. By the way, what we did with that is we reinforced it so that he would do it on command. In a way, that was his ball. Later on, every time he came into the performance arena for an actual performance and the ball was rolled out, he was waiting for his name to be called because he knew how to do that, and he wanted to do that because that was a fun thing for him. He had mastered it. That's how a lot of tricks are trained. You see what the animal wants to do and you just reinforce that. Sometimes you nudge it along and set it up if you want a particular cat to try the ball out. Well, you can manage that and have that be the only thing available to play with. You can nudge an animal toward one prop or another or entice them on top of something you want them to jump onto using a little piece of meat usually or some praise and hugging and rubbing. Lions love to be rubbed. That's how that's done.

(36:55):

But an aspect of that is that that lion that taught himself more or less to get on top of the ball and roll it along the ground, he didn't master that right away. He had to learn some things about how to balance his own body, how to get up on the ball without it rolling out from under him. There were all kinds of aspects to that, and it was a difficult thing to do, and it took him quite a while to get really good at it. It took him quite a while to get bad at it. After he was bad at it, he then later got good at it.

(37:31):

That's something that we fail to remember I think sometimes with our students when they're learning A&P. I think we need to remind our students that they forget to remember this aspect of learning, and that is that it's hard. In the play part of it, the fun part of play maybe I should say, comes in when we're done after the hard part is over. When the hard part is happening, we're frustrated. We're sweating. We're working hard. But when that part is over, even if we haven't really mastered whatever it is we're trying to master in our playtime, when we're done, we feel some level of satisfaction. We feel like we had fun doing that. A lot of play that we do as humans, even as adult humans, a lot of the sports we play, they're not easy, they're difficult. Sometimes the more difficult they are, the more satisfied we feel when we're done with a play session. Whether we've achieved the goal we wanted to achieve or not, it still feels like fun. It still feels like something we want to do again.

(38:43):

If we look at teaching and learning A&P that way and try to emphasize and appreciate, be mindful of that play aspect of it that we're playing around here. It's okay if we fail a few times. We need to set up a situation where failures can happen. Low stakes or no stakes testing is something I've talked about a lot over the years in this podcast. That would be an example of a way to fail and get up again and fail and get up again without it harming the overall grade, which we know is so important in so many different ways to both students and to the educational culture at large. And really just step back and let it be playtime in our class and have fun and really look for opportunities to have fun and really try to find ways to emphasize to students and remind them to be mindful of the fun aspect of it.

(39:42):

But another thing that this article talks about that I want to call out that I think is very important, and this worked with lions and tigers back in the day as well, and that is the play isn't going to work well unless there is a level of trust in the situation. When I was working with lions and tigers, if I was in there playing with them, they had to be able to trust me. They had to know that I wasn't in there to harm them in any way. That's another thing that people get wrong about lion taming, that we come in with a whip and a chair and start beating the animals. And that's a good way to get them to not trust you right away. As a matter of fact, I did at one time work with some animals that had been treated that way by someone who didn't know what they were doing, and the animals were psychologically damaged, and it took a long time to get them to trust me and even get close to them. They did eventually start working and playing and so on and it worked out okay, but it would've been much better had they not had that experience, obviously.

(40:52):

That doesn't work for training, and that's true for our students as well. When we come in with that whip and chair attitude, that is we come in with a persona that is very demanding without also being very warm and friendly and supportive, then we're going to get into some trouble because the students are going to back off and they're not going to want to play. They're not going to listen to any talk you give them about, hey, this is fun, isn't it? No, it's not. You're mean. I know that sometimes students interpret us being demanding as being mean. That's not the kind of meanness I'm talking about. I'm talking having a classroom demeanor that is not playful, that is the bad kind of demanding, demanding only. Sometimes called toxic rigor. That's not what we want to do. What we want to do is be that trusted friend, that trusted coach, that trusted playground monitor who is going to be there and guide the students along so that they're doing things safely and they're doing things in a way that they can be nudged along like, hey, why don't you try this? That's not working. Here's what works for me.

Here's what has worked for other students. That trust part is a big part of play, and play is one of those aspects of playfulness that really is learning.

(42:27):

That's why animals play in the wild. They play because they're learning to hunt. They're learning to defend themselves. They're learning to do all kinds of different things that they will need to do as an adult, and even as adults they play to practice those skills and get better at those skills. We can apply that principle easily to any classroom, including our own.

Authenticity

Kevin Patton (42:54):

In talking about our teaching persona, I mentioned that it's really coming from our own selves. It's not something made up. It's not a facade. It's not fake. It's not all of ourselves, but it's those parts of ourselves that we want to put forward and maybe amplify to our students to get them to see us in a way that's going to be helpful for their learning. It's going to promote an atmosphere in our course that is going to promote success in learning.

(43:31):

There's a topic that I want to circle back to because I've already discussed it before. In a couple of different previous episodes, back in episode 63, I talked about making mistakes and what to do when we make a mistake and gave some practical tips there. And then in episode 51, which came before that, I talked a lot about what was called the case for transparency and why transparency with our students is important. Both of those ideas play into an article that I read recently that came from the Harvard Business Review, where they were looking at what some researchers had done where they asked leaders in various organizations. Isn't that what we are? We're leaders in an organization called a course.

(44:24):

Anyway, they had leaders in various organizations tell how they would introduce themselves to their prospective employee, or in our case students. What most of them did was they talked about all their strengths. Period. That was it. They talked about their strengths. The researchers found out that's a mistake. They did some testing of different groups and they found that if the leaders also revealed some of their own weaknesses, some of the mistakes they've made, as long as they're not serious criminal, immoral

type things that are lying deep down in there, and I hope that you don't have any or many of those that we need to worry about, but do worry about them because that's not something that we want to make part of our teaching persona.

(45:26):

But everybody has weaknesses, and there are many common weaknesses and common mistakes that we make. I can talk about the experiences of skipping classes when I shouldn't have as an undergraduate. I can talk about experiences of not studying long enough or hard enough or mostly not in the right way when I was a student and how that affected my grades. There's lots of different kinds of mistakes, and they're going to see me make mistakes. As I mentioned in that episode 63 segment about making mistakes, I make mistakes in front of students, and sometimes students point out those mistakes and how I handle that is important. If I resist it and try to fight against it and act as if I did not make a mistake, that's not good. No. Oh, you think my students are going to relate to me, they're going to trust me if I do that? I don't think they are.

(46:22):

My point here is that our teaching persona, when we're thinking about it, when we're figuring out what is it we're going to present to students, let's be transparent about, let's be open and honest about our flaws and put it out there. Maybe make an effort to put it out there even when it doesn't just happen to come up in the course of things and point out what our weaknesses are. Come back to it every once in a while and mention it. Not make it part of the course or part of the content of the course, but make it part of our teaching persona so that it's there and visible and known by our students.

(47:04):

What they found in the research, by the way, is that people who do that, leaders who do that, and I would go far as to say teachers who do that, they're going to come across as more authentic. Why are they going to come across as more authentic? Because they're being more authentic. They're not just talking about the good parts of themselves. They're talking about the parts that can use some work. When we do that, that's going to generate some goodwill and it's going to build that trust that we're after. There's a link, as there always is, to this article in the show notes.

Staying Connected

Kevin Patton (47:46):

In this episode, I discussed our teaching persona, the person our students see us as in our course. I talked about how we might want to stress our supportive attitude and how we can act on that and how gestures can influence our communication with students. I talked about how play and playfulness can be part of that game of learning, and we discussed why authenticity is important in our teaching persona.

(48:20):

If you don't see links in your podcast player, go to the show notes at the episode page at theAPprofessor.org/137, which I hope is working by the time you hear this. That darn website has been having the longest case of hiccups I've ever seen. But despite the uncertainty, we carry on, right? If the website is down when you visit, go to Listennotes.com. That's Listennotes, all one word, dot com, and find us there, or really, you can find us anywhere you listen to audio, but you want to look for a place that actually has the show notes visible. Once you find the show notes, you can explore any ideas mentioned in this podcast. While you're there, you can claim your digital credential for professional development just for listening to this episode. You're always encouraged to call in with your questions, comments, and ideas at the podcast hotline, that's 1-833-LION-DEN or 1-833-546-6336, or send a recording or written message to podcast@theAPprofessor.org. I'll see you down the road.

Aileen Park (49:48):

The A&P Professor is hosted by Dr. Kevin Patton, an award-winning professor and textbook author in human anatomy and physiology.

Kevin Patton (50:02):

This episode is not to be used as a personal flotation device.