



# My Love Affair

## WITH TEACHING

*After three decades on the Peabody College faculty, she's never been more sure of her calling.*

BY PROFESSOR KATHY HOOVER-DEMPSEY

I love teaching. I love it for its relationships, its roots in psychological theory and research, its creativity, and the learning that comes from its challenges.

That I would love teaching was not a given. Growing up in the '50s and of somewhat stubborn bent, I was determined to avoid career fields traditionally open to women. When I entered UC-Berkeley as a freshman in 1960, I reveled in the unfolding political life of the times. I loved the amazing optimism for social change that accompanied John F. Kennedy's presidency, the beginning of the Peace Corps, freedom rides, voter registration drives, and LBJ's emergent programs to eliminate poverty in the United States. I shopped among the liberal arts for a major that would lead to an exciting and challenging career. A first course in psychology quickly became the last as its focus on behaviorism struck me as inordinately limited. Political science emerged as a field with future and potential: history, social relationships, human organization and social change all woven into one fine discipline. I thoroughly enjoyed it. As I entered my senior year, I thought of law and international relations as next steps and began exploring graduate school options.

Early in my last semester, I spied a poster outside the lecture hall. It featured kids of many ages standing in front of a decrepit-looking school building—background for description of a foundation-sponsored

program designed to attract mid-career adults into teaching in inner-city schools. The program promised a year of full-time graduate work combined with full-time teaching, low pay, and a chance to make a difference for children and families who needed hope and effective education. I knew I wasn't "mid-career" and reminded myself that teaching was not among my future options. But something about contributing to change in social structures and improving children's life chances captured my full attention.

A few weeks later I added an application for the teaching program to the grad-school possibilities out for review. Believing the program was a "what if and maybe" option at the bottom of my list of preferences, I was startled by my genuinely excited reaction upon opening a letter six weeks later: I was one of 15 (mostly mid-career) participants selected for the program. With continuing surprise at my enthusiasm, I accepted, took my finals, received my A.B. in political science with delight, and walked into a career I had only thought to avoid during much of my childhood and adolescence.

I discovered quickly that I loved teaching. The summer of course work and full-time student teaching was intriguing and challenging. The first day of the 1964–65 academic year arrived, and (sleepless night notwithstanding) I met my "own" class of first graders at Ralph Bunche Elementary School in Oakland, Calif.

That day, and the full year to come, ran high with energy and the excitement that comes from participating in children's lives, coming to know their parents' hopes for their futures, meeting frustrations and learning challenges head on, and watching the daily complexities of children's social and cognitive development. I left the year feeling deeply fascinated with new worlds of inquiry and work: children's development, the links between home lives and classroom learning, the contextual sources of educational success and failure, and the immensely complex and challenging process of teaching.

During the next few years, I traveled, taught in public-school Head Start and elementary programs, worked with community-based education and development programs in Uganda, and did research with a remarkable professor of education law who had argued *Brown v. Board of Education* before the U.S. Supreme Court. In these experiences, I learned of Susan Gray's research on young children's learning

on children's learning and the possibilities of social change through education.

My search for an academic home began and ended—as I would discover to my surprise many years later—when I found Peabody College in 1973. Peabody was then, and remains, an outstanding place to teach and learn. It has been an extraordinary context in which to build and use knowledge of human development, cognitive and social dimensions of learning, and teaching. I was privileged to learn from Sue Gray and work with Nick Hobbs in those early years, and it has been rewarding to participate in Peabody's own development—from an exemplary regional institution with national and international claims to excellence, to an outstanding national research hub, woven into the merged and reinvigorated intellectual fabric of Vanderbilt University.

Why do I love teaching at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University? The reasons are as varied as 30 years' worth of memorable interactions with undergraduates, graduate students and

related to human development. My graduate students are similarly notable, for their remarkable accomplishments as undergraduates (e.g., undergraduate honors, research and service projects) and in their early professional lives (e.g., teaching in innovative programs serving high-needs students, creating after-school and community programs, serving as research assistants in university-based research on child development). They're exceptional, too, for their abilities and notable contributions to the faculty research programs they join.

I love teaching here because large and small courses enter my regular mix of teaching opportunities. (By Peabody standards, of course, large courses aren't all that big; they generally enroll a maximum of 80 to 90 students.) What's great about teaching these large courses? I really like being able to lecture at times, weaving theory, research findings and varied applications into perspectives that invite questions and discoveries about the material we're considering. I enjoy the challenge of learning everyone's names, creating discussions, engaging many students' opinions and perspectives, and helping my students understand that peers also contribute to learning. I love the opportunities created by these large courses to work with both graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants. My TAs and I meet together regularly to plan and discuss sessions, anticipate issues in individual work with students, and work on creating and evaluating exams and paper assignments. Perhaps best of all, I get a front-row seat for observing my TAs' realization that teaching is a great stimulus for learning.

My smallest courses, of 12 to 14 students, offer excellent counterpoints: ease of establishing a sense of group and relationships, opportunities to draw everyone into discussion, time to wander on creative tangents and paths of unexpected application, and the ability to tailor content and assignments to personal interests.

I love teaching at Peabody because I can easily integrate research into teaching. My research program focuses on

family-school relationships and ways in which parental involvement enhances student learning, especially among high-risk students. I, along with my colleague Howard Sandler and our students (graduate and undergraduate), examine why parents become involved in their children's education and how their involvement, once engaged, influences children's development and learning. My courses are grounded, at least in part, in child and adolescent developmental theory and research, and our research program offers rich sources of perspective on why and how children learn, how families influence cognitive and social development, and how one might increase family support of positive developmental outcomes.

My research and teaching are also integrated as we involve graduate and undergraduate students in our research program. My undergraduate students' research-related experiences may include independent studies, participation in Vanderbilt's Undergraduate Summer Research Program, or participation in one of the College's honors programs (two years of engaging in research within the adviser's general research program). My graduate students are, of course, active participants in and contributors to our research program. They also are engaged, in particularly positive ways, in mentoring younger lab members as they become scholars and colleagues in their own right.

Finally, for now, I love teaching at Peabody because I can teach with colleagues. This means I get to observe my colleagues' teaching and brainstorm with them about approaches to improving teaching. For many years I had the pleasure of co-teaching the introductory developmental course of the human and organizational development major with Professor Bob Innes, chief author and director of the major. Teaching with complementary styles, holding specific areas of expertise, and pursuing particular interests, we taught and observed as more than a decade's worth of Peabody freshmen entered the University, learned much about undergraduate life, and came to learn that understanding human development is fascinating and a lot of hard work.

This past spring I thoroughly enjoyed teaching a freshman honors seminar with



*Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey joined the Peabody College faculty in 1973, six years before the College's merger with Vanderbilt University. Today she is associate professor of psychology, associate professor of education, and chair of Peabody's Department of Psychology and Human Development. A perennial favorite among Peabody students, Hoover-Dempsey has been awarded Vanderbilt's most prestigious honors, including the Chair of Teaching Excellence (1998–2001), the Chancellor's Cup (for contributions to student-faculty relationships outside the classroom; 1999), the Thomas Jefferson Award for Distinguished Service to Vanderbilt (1991), the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching (1988), and Peabody's Outstanding Professor Award.*


*Hoover-Dempsey also has held several other administrative and mentoring positions at Peabody, including director of graduate studies in psychology, associate dean for academic affairs, and director of the undergraduate major in child development. With research partner Howard Sandler—a professor of psychology and Peabody faculty member since 1970—Hoover-Dempsey currently leads Vanderbilt's Family-School Partnership Lab, made up of a team of researchers committed to the scientific investigation of the reciprocal relationships among families, schools and children.*

Professor Howard Sandler, focused on a topic that was simply fun: "What makes universities tick?" Our students were a wonderful and invigorating mix, from varied backgrounds and all Peabody majors. They were thoughtful, regularly insightful, and offered a never-ending source of interesting observations and great questions. I've also had unique opportunities to learn from watching other colleagues' teaching, thanks to various University-supported programs. In these moments of observation and dialogue, I've been able to learn from the teaching of colleagues in fields often far from my own (e.g., anthropology, art history, bioscience, history, medicine, music, religion). In so doing, I've had countless valuable and generative opportunities to appreciate anew the transdisciplinary and varied nature of teaching excellence.

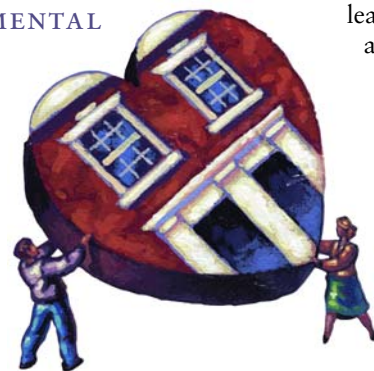
Of course, there are other reasons to love teaching at Peabody. It is valued, opportunities to develop strong new academic programs are myriad, and our students—graduate and undergraduate—are superb sources of inspiration for improved teaching. Most of all, teaching

at Peabody means relationships and learning—the merging of developmental theory and research with knowledge of the conditions and relationships that optimize human development and learning.

I can't close without confessing that writing these reflections has been a surprising challenge. Taking advantage of much patience from a fine editor, I've come to realize that the challenge has emerged from countless memories of so many unique, interesting, accomplished, and generally wonderful students. My earliest students are now, as am I, deeply engaged in careers; many are now experiencing, as am I, the realities of parenting children who are themselves undergraduates. My students, from my early years here through the present, are in or heading for careers too numerous to name but amazing in variety and impact on human development.

What I have learned and loved about teaching at Peabody has come from each of them. To each I owe more thanks than can be imagined for sharing this superb process of teaching and learning with me. 

**MOST OF ALL, TEACHING AT PEABODY MEANS RELATIONSHIPS AND LEARNING—THE MERGING OF DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND RESEARCH WITH KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONDITIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS THAT OPTIMIZE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING.**



at Peabody College, Nicholas Hobbs' interventions and research on community-based programs for children and families at Vanderbilt University, the history of educational change for marginalized families in the U.S., and themes of consistency and variation in the development of children across cultures. My Ph.D. work in educational psychology with a focus on child development at Michigan State University grew from this kaleidoscope of experiences. I left the program fully committed to teaching and research on human development, with a focus on examining the influence of social context

colleagues, but four seem most important.

First, I love teaching at Peabody because I teach undergraduate and graduate students. My undergrads are notable for energy, varied perspectives, questions, probing, enjoyment of learning, challenges to my own ideas, and contributions to the depths and dimensions of teaching as a vibrant and vital process. Their interests range from spending four years in a great place to creating a deep and varied set of learning experiences as foundation for graduate school and professional careers