

APA DIVISION 15 PRESENTS

➤ ONE TIP

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Negotiating the Scholar & Educator Roles

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Most educational psychologists I know live with some tension around being a scholar as well as an educator. Heavy teaching loads leave little time for scholarship. Research projects and publication-focused promotion criteria pull attention away from teaching. And jobs that are “research only,” “teaching only,” or heavily administrative can leave one or both roles feeling unfulfilled.

I use scholar instead of researcher and educator instead of teacher intentionally, to broaden how we see our work as educational psychologists. Wherever we are employed—a research university, teaching-focused college, research-practice center or company, policy organization, or self-employed consultants—we both generate systematic and credible knowledge and promote others’ learning and development. In other words, we almost always have both roles as scholars and educators, even when our job description seems to suggest otherwise.



ONE TIP PRESENTED BY APA DIVISION 15



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I experienced the tension between my scholar and educator roles twenty-nine years ago, as a new assistant professor, when I was assigned to teach a large, 200-student Introduction to Educational Psychology course. I inherited the traditional course structure: weekly lectures, TA-led discussion groups, midterm and final multiple-choice exams. Preparing for it initially felt like a chore that competed with what I needed to do for promotion and tenure—analyzing my dissertation data about students’ perceptions of the learning environment, their motivation, and well-being. But then I realized that I had an opportunity. I could think about the course as a “live laboratory” for those theoretical processes I was trying to understand.

Redesigning the course according to motivation theories with my TAs became a decade-long collaborative inquiry process. We experimented with structures, assignments, and assessments, and collected formal and informal feedback. I definitely learned more about the characteristics of motivating environments for diverse students from that course than from my dissertation data.

From that experience came the insight that, as educational psychologists, we are fortunate that the contents of our scholar and educator roles often overlap. And from that insight comes my one tip for you: whenever a task looks like it’s either scholarly or educational, ask, “What can I learn from this for my other role?” In scholarly tasks, I think about what they teach me as an educator: How do my theory and research challenge and inform my assumptions about curriculum, assessment, mentoring, workshops, consultations, conference presentations, and writing for different audiences? In educational tasks, I ask how they could inform my scholar role: What new insights do I have about phenomena, research questions, study designs, and interpretations of data analysis?

We rarely can control our course load, project deadlines, or publication expectations. But we can reframe how we approach them. Making the roles overlap explicit does not eliminate tensions, but it can turn some of the role conflict into productive tension. We could treat each teaching and research task as an opportunity to have one role inform the other, reduce the tensions between them, and, in my experience, build a more coherent professional identity and support professional growth.