

**El Maestro de Maestros Talks about His Experience as  
President of Division 15: An Interview with Wilbert J. (Bill)  
McKeachie**

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Abstract

Dr. Héfer Bembenutty interviewed Dr. Bill McKeachie, a past president of the American Psychological Association, Division 15 (Educational Psychology). In the interview, Professor McKeachie revealed his experience as past president of Division 15. Professor McKeachie has been the president of the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Association of Higher Education, the American Psychological Foundation, the Division of Educational Instruction and School Psychology of the International Association of Applied Psychology, and APA's Division 2. Professor McKeachie has received eight honorary degrees, the American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal for Lifetime Contributions to Psychology, and the American Psychological Association Presidential Citation for exemplary service to the academic and scientific community. His classic book, *Teaching Tips*, is now in its 13th edition. During the interview, Professor McKeachie remembered that he called his presidential address *Psychology in the Bicentennial Year*. He reported that at that time, cognitive psychology had basically come in to counter behaviorism, and he argued that we are all behaviorists—not strict behaviorists in Skinnerian terms, but the difference between us and physiologists or economists or sociologists or other groups was that our dependent variable always is the behavior of people. He said that he tried to be unifying and make connections with the various theories.

# **El Maestro de Maestros Talks about His Experience as President of Division 15: An Interview with Wilbert J. (Bill) McKeachie**

**Dr. Héfer Bembenutty**

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Wilbert J. McKeachie has been the president of the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Association of Higher Education, the American Psychological Foundation, the Division of Educational Instruction and School Psychology of the International Association of Applied Psychology, and APA's Division 2 and 15. He received his PhD at the University of Michigan in 1949 and is former Director of the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. He also served as Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of Michigan from 1961 to 1971. Professor McKeachie has received eight honorary degrees, the American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal for Lifetime Contributions to Psychology, and the American Psychological Association Presidential Citation for exemplary service to the academic and scientific community. His classic book, *Teaching Tips*, is now in its 13th edition (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2010).



*HB: How were you involved with Division 15 before you became its president?*

BM: I was probably involved as a member mainly, but I don't remember any specific activities that I was in. Originally, I was the only person working in the teaching of psychology. Well, at that time, most people were hired for research jobs, and teaching was secondary. Then when I finished my Ph.D. in '48, I went to the department chair, Don Marquis, and said, "I guess I should look for a job." He said, "Well, you can have a job at any university you want in the country, there's lots of jobs." Then I said, "Well, I would like to start at Sarah Lawrence College or Bennington College because they're interested in teaching." A week later, Marquis said, "How'd you like to stay here and train our graduate students to teach psychology?" That was just not a typical career. I mean it probably wasn't a smart thing to do, although it turned out really well, but I said, "That sounds great." I'd been at war for three years and my wife's family and my folks were from this Michigan area, so I thought it'd be nice to stay around here for a while. I never thought it would last for almost sixty years! So I stayed on, and because I was the only person doing that sort of work, I quickly became well known. Part of it also was that Claude Buxton had a conference on teaching psychology at Northwestern in about 1948. Marquis sent me to that conference—or maybe Buxton invited me, I'm not sure—so I got to know a few other people who were interested in teaching psychology. I was essentially hired to teach 500 students of introductory psychology—we had 1000 students a term—and to train teaching fellows who handled discussion sections for the course. I lectured two or three hours a week and the fellows led discussions for another hour.

*HB: You also traveled around the country training teachers, right?*

BM: That came a little later because I got to be known as a person who was interested in the teaching of psychology. So people would ask me to do workshops for faculty at other universities.

*HB: What were some of the highlights that you pointed out for teachers?*

BM: One thing was not to just lecture, but to try and get students to do more thinking—not just writing notes on what the teacher said, but to do writing and have small group meetings in the class. I used to break my class up into groups. It was called Phillips 66—this was a combination of the name of a gasoline at the time and Don Philips, who was a professor at Michigan State University. He developed a method in which you let six students talk to one another for six minutes, so you had to split the class up into groups of six. I would race up the aisles of the auditorium and count out, "Odd, even, odd, even, odd, even." The odd rows turned around and talked to the row behind them in groups of four to six. Then I'd give them some problem to talk about or some activity to do and ask them to report back and put the reports on the blackboard. Since I was a math teacher, I liked to use the blackboard. And then one group would report and I'd say, "Did any other groups come up with that solution?" We had like ninety groups reporting.

*HB: Back to when you were the president, what kind of research were you conducting at that time?*

BM: I've always conducted research. I did research on the ratings of psychology teacher ratings of teaching in general. Dr. Yi-Guang Lin and I have conducted research on a number of theories on teaching, especially related to test anxiety. Before that, I received a grant to study characteristics that related to effective teaching of teaching assistants. I compared males and females for some of the characteristics that worked well for males but would not work well for

females. I found that students expect females to be more nurturing, and if they aren't, females tend to be rated lower than similar teachers. If you are masculine, you aren't expected to be nice (chuckles). We had quite a number of studies in teaching psychology.

*HB: As for evaluation and the use of evaluation by administration, what were you researching at that point?*

BM: I was trying to find out which items related to one another and which items were valid in terms of effectiveness as measured by student learning. We were also observing classes to see how students' ratings compared to observers' ratings. Typically, one is hired for one's research, but I think after the 1960s, during which student uprisings emphasized student power, there was a greater tendency to take teaching into account. If you were teaching, you were probably not as likely to get hired as if you were a premier researcher.

*HB: You mentioned that you were also doing research on test anxiety. What were your findings on that?*

BM: We found that students who had high test anxiety did not do as well on an exam—say, the final examination—as on a practice exam that we gave them before the regular exam. Highly anxious students became anxious and worried and simply couldn't remember things or think as well as students who weren't so high in test anxiety.

*HB: Can you recall any controversies going on in the field of educational psychology at the time you were president of Division 15?*

BM: I think Skinnerian behaviorism had kind of passed its high point probably in the late 50s or early 60s, and the field was becoming more cognitive-oriented. Theoretically, at least, there probably weren't as many disagreements as there might have been ten years earlier.

*HB: What prompted you to accept the nomination of president of Division 15?*

BM: Well, I thought it was an honor. I'd been on the ballot for years for the presidency of APA and I thought it was just an honor to be on the ballot. Fred Skinner had been nominated once and wasn't elected, and he was so insulted that he would never run again. Usually he and I got the most nominations on the nominating ballot. So I considered it an honor just to be on the ballot and didn't expect to be elected. It turned out that that year, I did get elected as president of APA as well as of Division 15—, which is a little embarrassing. In fact, I think since then, they passed some regulation that you can't do that anymore! I asked people in Division 15 what I should do about it and they thought it was a good way of elevating the status of educational psychology by having an educational psychologist as APA president. I think the general notion is that it's enough to be president of APA without having other responsibilities. Division 15 was not a highly regarded field like experimental psychology is.

*HB: How did you manage as president of APA and Division 15 simultaneously?*

BM: Things weren't as demanding as they are now. I think the presidency of both APA and Division 15 were considered to be more honorific. I mean there were meetings you had to chair and attend as president of APA, and you're invited to attend State meetings and division meetings. But it really wasn't nearly as demanding as it is now. Now, it's practically a full-time job!

*HB: Do you remember what you said during your presidential address?*

BM: Yes, I do remember that I called it Psychology in the Bicentennial Year. Cognitive psychology had basically come in to counter behaviorism, and I argued that we are all behaviorists—not strict behaviorists in Skinnerian terms, but the difference between us and physiologists or economists or sociologists or other groups was that our dependent variable always is the behavior of people. And so I tried to be unifying and make connections with the various theories.

*HB: At the time of your presidency, what did Division 15 offer in terms of teacher preparation programs?*

BM: I was probably the only one not in the School of Education, which was unusual in and of itself. I think most Division 15 members were involved in training teachers. We were trying to know the theories more deeply and more practically so that teachers could do their jobs better than they had been used to doing before.

*HB: In general, how was learning conceptualized during your presidency?*

BM: At that time, we had become more cognitive, involving more structures and organizational material, and relating different things to each other instead of leaving them as isolated facts.

*HB: As the president, how influential did you consider women's voices in Division 15 at that point?*

BM: Quite influential. Obviously, there were males, but Lauren Resnick and others were certainly some of the prominent educational psychologists in the division.

*HB: How influential were the voices of minority scholars and minority students in Division 15?*

BM: I don't think there were a lot. But my own minority students were certainly active.

*HB: How do you attract new members to Division 15? How do you promote participation of your new scholars in the division?*

BM: I tried to get departments to encourage their graduate students to join or encourage new faculty to come to the division. Basically, I worked between departments and through people who were already members of Division 15.

*HB: Given your involvement with Division 15 for so many years, what might you change about Division 15 today if you could, and why?*

BM: That's an interesting question. I'm not really active enough now to know very much about what's going on, but as far as I can see, they are doing all right.

*HB: How do you see the state of Division 15?*

BM: As far as I know, it's good.

*HB: How would you like Division 15 members to remember you?*

**BM:** As somebody who has always been interested in teaching, who has tried to be a good teacher and good at training others to be teachers.

*HB: What would you like to tell to your Division 15 peers?*

**BM:** I think they're doing quite all right.

*HB: Thank you very much.*

