Albert Bregman, my mentor in cognitive psychology, was hardly my role model as a teacher. I became a modern lecturer-entertainer, with bullet points, borscht-belt humor and audiovisual razzle-dazzle. Al, like most of my professors at McGill University in the 1970s, sat at a table and rambled off the top of his head. Yet decades later I can remember Al’s musings: circling an idea, linking it with others, trying different vantage points, exploring variations on a theme.

It was all a revelation. Psychology at the time, anxious to look like a hard science, was an empiricist dust bowl, where a “theory” was a line drawn through a set of data points. Al was my first professor who probed ideas. How is Chomsky’s deep structure related to Piaget’s schemas and to the semantic networks of artificial intelligence? When a man pantomimes walking a dog, where is the “dog” in his behavior? Were neural-network models really cutting-edge science or just the old theory of the association of ideas? I never knew that you could analyze ideas in such depth and thought Al was the smartest person I had ever met.

But the most important science education is done at the bench. Wanting as much face time as possible, I did research in Al’s lab, which aimed to understand how the brain organizes a jumble of sound into experiences that correspond to the sound makers in the world. Not only was Al studying a tractable instance of the ancient problem of how the mind knows reality, but he also had the coolest toy in the department — a refrigerator-size minicomputer. As he and I passed the headphones back and forth, tweaking the beeps and boops, I learned how science is really done: create a world that will show that your ideas are right, but only if they are right. And so this philosophe with a minicomputer set me on a career of trying to understand how the mind works.

Steven Pinker is Harvard College professor of psychology at Harvard University and author of “The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature.”