Teaching Philosophy

I discovered a love for learning fairly late in my development. I was 17-years-old when I first realized education could be more than rote memorization of terms, dates, and facts and instead could be a process of understanding more deeply and thinking more critically about the fundamental laws that govern the natural world. I was captivated by the idea there is an order to the universe: events that seemed chaotic and objects that seem to be disconnected could be explained and even predicted by abstract and unseen laws. During my undergraduate psychology courses, I discovered that science offers a set of tools for rigorously and objectively evaluating the veracity of these laws. Understanding truth was not simply a matter of argumentation or appeals to authority. Equally fascinating to me was that the results of psychological research could be used not only to evaluate theories but also to have a positive impact on people’s lives.

As an instructor, my goal is to provide students with opportunities to have similar realizations. As such, my philosophy and approach to teaching involves a) emphasizing a small number of core issues, b) encouraging students’ active involvement in the educational process, and c) cultivating students’ critical thinking skills. I also set high expectations for student performance as well as for myself. Although most of my teaching experiences have involved undergraduate courses, I recently had the opportunity to lead a graduate seminar in my substantive area. In that course, I adopted the same approach to teaching, albeit in ways that were appropriate to more advanced graduate students.

One of the most central features of my teaching philosophy is the importance of promoting students’ understanding of the core principles. In other words, I aim to simplify the complexity of a topic by focusing on central issues or broad themes. This involves limiting the overall amount of content and connecting the information to central issues in an effort to encourage the long-term retention of and students’ abilities to think critically about the key concepts. One way I strive to accomplish this is by organizing each class session around a small number of core theoretical ideas, research questions, or methodological approaches. For example, in the graduate seminar, each class session focused a single theoretical tenet. The readings and class discussion were intended to promote students’ understanding of the key debates and the different bodies of research that serve as empirical arbitrators of the competing perspectives. I also strive to accomplish this goal by identifying themes that cut across multiple class sessions. For example, in the upper-level undergraduate course on Social Development, one of the key principles of the course is that social development occurs through interactions within close relationships. I repeatedly used this principle to understand multiple aspects of social development and when examining the influence of multiple interpersonal influences, including parents, peers, and teachers.

A second feature of my teaching philosophy is the belief that learning is most effective when students are actively engaged in the process. I aim to elicit student engagement in the classroom setting by strategically punctuating lectures with opportunities for student involvement. Within larger, undergraduate classes, one strategy for accomplishing this is group-based activities where students are involved in peer learning. For example, I will encourage students to work in small groups for a brief amount of time during class to connect the material to their own lives by thinking of personal examples of the phenomena. A second strategy is to illustrate the concepts by thoughtfully incorporating audio and video examples. For example, when I lecture on infant-caregiver attachment relationships, I show students brief video clips of the different patterns attachment. I also provide the students with a prototypical description of each classification and ask them to identify the classification that best fits with each video clip. This activity not only helps students recognize the behaviors that are indicative of each of the attachment patterns but also help
them gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the behaviors and their potential implications of early attachment patterns for later development. As a third example, for the graduate seminar, students were required to submit questions based on the readings prior to each class. I then used these questions to stimulate class discussion.

A third feature of my teaching philosophy is the emphasis on cultivating the students’ abilities to think critically about the concepts and ideas. One of the specific skills I aim to foster is an understanding of research methodology and how to evaluate scientific evidence. For example, I ask students to evaluate the strengths and limitations of a specific influential study or to design their own study to answer a specific question. A second skill is developing comfort and confidence with asking new questions. For example, as previously discussed, I typically base lectures around a small number of research questions and then I trace the various ways researchers have attempted to answer the questions. This organizational technique implicitly communicates that the essence of science is asking and answering questions about the world. The third skill involves making connections between the course information and their own lives and the lives of others. I model this by explaining the practical relevance of each topic and discussing the implications of research findings for specific societal issues. In addition, I designed two writing assignments in the Social Development course to help students connect the material discussed in this course to real-world situations. In this way, this personal teaching goal aim overlaps with third goal of the Psychology department’s undergraduate curriculum, which is to promote ethically and socially responsible behavior in a diverse world.

I believe it is important to set high expectations for students’ performance. Doing so helps students recognize and appreciate the importance of hard work rather than just innate abilities for deepening their understanding and sharpening their critical thinking skills. In my courses, I regularly communicate expectations for students’ performance and provide students with clear guidelines and tips for how to excel. Such guidelines include the need to be actively participating during class, asking questions, and taking notes on the reading and lecture materials. Because students learn the material the best when they engage with the reading material before the class, I include brief quizzes at the start of class sessions that assess students’ knowledge of the reading assignment for that day. In the midst of high expectations, I also work to create a culture of curiosity and enthusiasm for learning in the classroom.

I also set high standards for myself as the instructor. I try to model the importance of being organized and prepared for each class period. I also seek input from others in order to improve as an educator. For example, I often seek informal teaching evaluations from the students halfway through the semester and use that feedback to tailor my teaching methods to the particular needs of that group of students. When needed, I seek outside input. For example, although I received moderately high ratings for the graduate seminar I taught, students’ comments indicated that some of the specific assignments and pedagogical techniques were not as effective as I had hoped. In response to this feedback, I sought the advice of two highly experienced and award-winning instructors—one inside my department and one outside of it—to adapt my teaching methods to maximize graduate students’ engagement. These conversations spurred a number of ideas that I look forward to applying when teaching the graduate-level course in Social Development in the near future.