TEACHING STATEMENT / PHILOSOPHY
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The groundwork for my development as an educator started as an undergraduate at the University of Hawaii. At that time I was fortunate to work as a student researcher at the Center for Studies of Multicultural Higher Education. The goal of this center was to facilitate educational outcomes for students of different ethnic backgrounds. The emphasis was on educating the faculty on how culture influences “styles of learning” in ways that can facilitate or hinder learning at traditional institutions. This approach stresses flexibility and is sensitive to the skills of different individuals based on their background.

This contextual approach forms the basis of my philosophy as an instructor. Each student, depending on their level and background, will bring differing skills/preferences for what teaching method works best for them in the classroom. As a result, a course that uses different modes of learning in a well-planned experience will have the best chance of capitalizing on such diversity while also strengthening a student’s ability to learn through other modes. This approach guides the manner in which I fulfill my course learning objectives. For our undergraduates, my main objectives focus on fostering an understanding and appreciation for our field and its usefulness. This includes covering (a) basic theory and research to provide a well-rounded understanding of psychology, (b) discussing selected areas of application that psychology has made important contributions to increase appreciation for our discipline, and (c) relate psychological theories and findings to processes operating in their everyday lives to make psychology more personally relevant.

Consistent with my approach, I utilize different modes of learning in the classroom in order to effectively communicate this information and strengthen differing learning skills. First, I lecture by using vivid and/or personal examples to illustrate complex principles. The use of relevant and appropriate examples from my personal life is particularly effective as it helps students identify more strongly with me as an instructor and increases motivation due to the social nature of learning. Such identification makes me more approachable and also helps students realize that their lofty educational goals are attainable if an average person like me can do it! I also use films and guest lecturers that are carefully screened in order to provide the integrative class experience that is necessary to facilitate learning. An important part of incorporating different learning styles into my teaching is the use of collaborative learning groups. Many courses are structured such that a student’s work is in isolation or in competition with others. In contrast, the “real-world” will often require individuals to work cooperatively in small group settings. To facilitate their learning of such skills and the course content, students in groups of four complete numerous in-class group projects. Importantly, each student has a defined role (i.e., reader, checker, encourager, elaborator) that rotates so that they learn different group skills. Their work in these discussion groups counts 20% of their final grade so it is an important part of the class. In my opinion (and consistent with basic educational work on the use of collaborative groups), students not only understand concepts better but are more motivated to engage in course material. I should mention that I have used this technique for both small (40) and large class (100) settings and its works equally well as long as you have the physical space for it. I have also incorporated collaborative groups in my online Health Psychology course to good initial reviews with the help of Drs. Friedrich, Sansone, and the CTLE.

An additional component of undergraduate instruction is the guidance of students to graduate school and careers relevant to psychology. As part of the class, I always invite all students to meet with
me about their career plans. I typically teach a large class so I end up spending a fair amount of time personally meeting and guiding students to relevant laboratories, graduate programs, and allied careers. I have helped guide my students to graduate programs in psychology, counseling, social work, medicine, physical therapy, and law. I consider this one of the most satisfying aspects of interacting with students because I am able to directly facilitate the next step of their careers.

My graduate level teaching is also influenced by my contextual approach. My main learning objective for graduate instruction in our field is on the development of critical thinking skills to facilitate course knowledge. I reach this goal by again using a variety of teaching techniques. I do lecture, but the majority of the time is spent facilitating critical group discussion on a topic. In this context, a few students have difficulty participating due to differences in factors such as their present confidence level or “wait time” (time that is perceived to be appropriate to raise an issue following another’s comment). In order to help students with such issues, I require each student to co-lead a topic discussion with me. I first help them prepare in advance so that this is a positive educational experience. I then provide each student with constructive feedback about their discussion skills following class. In my experience, this has been an effective way to make sure all students participate and hence get the most out of the course material.

One of the most important and personally satisfying aspect of my graduate teaching involves mentoring my graduate students. Most of my students are interested in academic careers and have a much longer training period with me so I focus on the development of critical thinking skills, independence, and collegiality. I should mention that even if some of these graduate students do not go on to academic careers, the skills they acquire will benefit them generally across a wide variety of professions. This is important because although most of my former students are in academics, they are also represented in areas such as research administration and clinical practice. I take each graduate student as an individual and alter my mentoring in an attempt to capitalize on their strengths and correct any weaknesses (although the overall goal to develop these particular skills at a high level remains the same). To meet these goals, I first attempt to be sure that students have a firm grasp of the literature in their respective areas of research, as well as a general understanding of well-known theories and literatures in psychology. This first goal is necessary but not sufficient for strong training. More importantly, I attempt to provide students with skills regarding critical thinking and research methodology (which provides a framework for critical thinking). As a result, I expect my graduate students to be heavily involved in every stage of the research process; including conceptualization, design, analyses, and writing manuscripts in a first author capacity.

During the course of graduate training, I attempt to shape their academic skills and independence by moving them to more complicated skills only after they have shown mastery of easier skills. Thus, each student progresses at their own rate. I also facilitate group involvement in other student projects and thus develop the collaborative, collegial skills I view as important to their careers. To provide my graduate students with detailed feedback regarding their development, I meet with each student every week. These issues are also discussed during our laboratory meetings (twice a month), along with other issues surrounding their professional development (e.g., ethics etc.). I continue to mentor them into their academic / professional careers and all of them know they can ask me for professional advice or help at any time if needed. Overall, I believe my flexible, collaborative style to be effective as I have never failed to mentor a student to their degree. It hasn’t always been easy and some students blossomed early, and some during their last years of graduate training. However, all have reached a standard of excellence that made me proud to be their mentor.