

Carina Pals, PhD

Department of Psychology,
University of Utah Asia Campus
Incheon, South Korea

Phone: +82 10 2691 7717

Email: contact@carinapals.com

Statement of teaching objectives and philosophy

The ultimate goal of a university degree program is teaching students independent and creative thinking; while the subject matter itself is important, the most important skill to learn is how to *use* that knowledge on many different levels. In my teaching, my aim is to help students create the foundation of knowledge and skills that will allow them to critically evaluate new information in the field as well as re-evaluate what they know in the light of new findings. To state my objectives explicitly: 1. Help students create a strong foundation of knowledge. 2. Help students develop and improve core skills. 3. Help students develop critical thinking skills.

For students to develop a strong foundation of knowledge (objective 1), they would need to learn and understand a range of core facts, concepts, and principles. One of the key ingredients for successful learning is motivation. In my teaching I try to motivate the students in a number of ways, first by highlighting why a particular topic is relevant and interesting; putting it in a broader perspective, highlighting links with other courses or disciplines, practical applications, or links with everyday life. I complement my explanation of core concepts and challenging parts of the book with interesting case studies, anecdotes, or YouTube videos. I encourage the students to think about the material by, for example, discussing experiments in class and inviting the students to predict the outcome based on what they just learned, or I invite students to come up with examples or experiences from their everyday lives, pop culture, or links with things they learned in other courses, bringing the focus back again to the broader perspective. Engaging with the material in this way does not only help students remember the material better, it also gets students to link, apply, evaluate, discuss the material right from the start, developing their ability to use and apply their newly acquired knowledge, and to think creatively and critically (objective 3).

This broader perspective and level of engagement with the material, or lack thereof, may have been the problem with my PSY3140 Cognitive Neuropsychology course, the first few times I taught it. The textbook I use covers a huge range of topics and it was difficult to keep the students engaged and interested, which was reflected in the student course feedback: the course effectiveness received a particularly low rating in Fall 2018 (though fortunately, instructor effectiveness rating was not bad), while my ratings for other courses was approaching department averages. This prompted me to try a new approach with this course. To create more structure, I divided the material into 4 main topics: Perception, Memory & Learning, Attention & Executive function, Emotion & Social cognition. Further, to increase student involvement and motivation, we now start each topic with a group presentation: a group of students presents a particular disorder or phenomenon that fits with the topic, and discusses the cognitive processes & brain regions involved. The new structure helps organize the material covered in the course and makes it easier to see the

broader perspective. The group presentations bring student engagement to a new level, and as an added bonus, gives the students some responsibility and ownership over what is covered in the course, which has noticeably boosted student motivation. The new approach has been a success: the next time I taught the class in Fall 2019, my student course feedback was above department average for both course and instructor effectiveness.

In my assessment of student progress, I have similarly made changes since I first started teaching at the UAC. While I still use midterms and finals in most courses, I am incorporating more formative assessment to monitor student progress and to motivate students to train and improve their critical-thinking and other skills (objective 3 and 2) by rewarding effort and improvement. I use range of in-class or homework assignments that allow the students to practice skills (e.g. summarizing, objective 2), apply challenging principles learned in class (e.g. for sensation & perception: how do our lenses bend the light to focus on the retina? and how is that affected by myopia/hyperopia/glasses?), relate the material covered in class to their own everyday life experience, use what they learned to come up with an explanation for a phenomenon that has not yet been covered in class, or critically evaluate a blog post or academic article (objective 3). Academic writing skills rely on both critical-thinking and language skills, and the level varies greatly between students, perhaps doubly so in a student population with as many non-native English speakers as at the UAC. The best way to improve academic writing, both style (objective 2) and content/flow of ideas and argumentation (objective 3), is by doing and revising. Although it is a lot of work, I try to provide students with detailed feedback on their writing assignments myself. To motivate the students to make the best use of the feedback and to reward progress, the grade for the revised paper is then in large part based on the improvements made since the draft. It has been rewarding to see some of the more dedicated students make very impressive progress over the course of a semester.

My personal goal for my professional development in teaching is to keep learning and improving as I teach. I plan to take what I have learned from redesigning the Cognitive Neuropsychology course, and apply this to similarly improve other courses I teach. The past two semesters teaching online during a pandemic, has provided new challenges and taught me new things that I can apply when teaching online in the future, or could perhaps even translate to the classroom.