

Teaching Statement

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A teacher once said to me, “You won’t necessarily be able to see the changes in your students during the hour or so that you are with them, so you need to teach them *tools*—tools that they can take with them and use on their own”. In addition, I am a firm believer that “learning is not a spectator sport” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 7). These statements form the basis of my teaching philosophy. My goal is to give my students different tools to become critical thinkers and active learners not only within my classroom and research lab, but in other classes and situations, as well. To provide these tools, I try to ask questions that peak their curiosity and make them interested in becoming active learners, I engage them in demonstrations, hands-on learning activities, and empirical research, and I maintain a flexible teaching style.

Engaging Students

Asking Questions. I believe in asking questions. Lots of them. I want my students to understand the material, I want them to demonstrate to me that they understand, and most importantly I want them to think. Hence, I ask my students to explain concepts and differences between two concepts or analyses before providing the answer, and I ask questions that cast me as the devil’s advocate to encourage thought (and discussion) about a less popular side of a topic. In return, I am patient in giving students the time, opportunity, and confidence to respond. This enables me to figure out how to proceed (e.g., what to elaborate on) and makes the students more active learners—rather than regurgitators.

Active Learning Tasks and Stories. Experiential learning provides students with experiences and real-life examples, and provides students with the opportunity to critically assess the theories and apply them to other aspects in their lives. To enhance experiential learning, I use active learning tasks when I teach. I stress to my students from the beginning that these tasks are not done solely for fun or to “entertain”; rather, they are tools that enable all of us to better understand the material. I have found that allowing students to experience a phenomenon first naturally leads them into discussion on the relevant concepts and research. For example, students often resist the thought that they conform. Rather than speak to an invincible audience, I have my students experience conformity first. In one demonstration, each student receives a packet with letters and vowels on each page. Students circle all the consonants (or vowels) as fast as they can. When they finish, I instruct them to crumple the sheet of paper and throw it on the floor. While some students may give me quizzical looks, most comply. The circling, crumpling, and throwing paper process continues a few more times, and students rarely stop complying. My favorite part of this task is looking at my class, looking at the floor, and asking them “Why is there all this paper on the floor?” This simple question leads us into a discussion of conformity, experiencing conformity, and even the merits (and problems) with the Milgram and Asch studies. It is also very insightful for us – as a class – to look at who doesn’t conform – and discuss why.

I also tell stories with the material as I teach by building on previous concepts, explicitly pointing out relationships to past material, and by using real life examples to help explain the concepts. These real life examples range from my own stories, my students stories, current events, and pop culture (e.g., TV and movies clips). Having students experience and apply the material to their own lives (or pop-culture) gives them the opportunity to think beyond the textbook, to elaborate on the material to enhance recall and retention, and to critique the

applicability of the theories. Students have commented that they “enjoy the interactive classes, and that they are much more helpful than listening to another lecture”. Students have also commented that “the in-class experiments serve to solidify concepts and understanding” and that they “enjoy the way the professor used real life examples and stories about herself to help the class understand” because these techniques make “those in the course relaxed and better able to express themselves”.

Assignments and Research. Class assignments and getting my students involved in research are other techniques that I use to engage my students and encourage them to become active learners and critical thinkers. I assign projects that encourage students to apply theories to other contexts. For example, students write about an experience they have had with a theory/concept (e.g., cognitive dissonance). They break a social norm and discuss how their experience mapped onto (or failed to) the theories/studies on norms. Students analyze novels and/or the media (e.g., t.v., movies, advertisements) based on theories/concepts. They also conduct mini-research projects to test hypotheses, and debate issues based on psychological research (e.g., eyewitness memory, raising children). In some classes, my students keep a term-long journal where they analyze real life examples in relation to the psychological concepts we discuss.

As research assistants, my students experience the entire research process as they participate in weekly lab meetings, help create stimuli, are experimenters and confederates, help enter and analyze data, and present their research projects. One of my favorite parts of teaching is watching my students grow professionally; thus, I encourage my students to present their findings at national and regional conferences and, when appropriate, to publish their work. Students comment: “This class not only helped me to learn what social psychology is all about, but helped improve my observation skills, research skills, and even the ability to set up my own studies and experiments to be able to infer on people’s behaviors. Learning how to conduct such studies and experiments was very helpful and taught me a lot about the process by which researchers put information together and gather statistics.”

Flexibility

Teaching, to me, is like getting a “revise and resubmit” from the editors of the classroom—my students. After each lecture, after each topic, and after each semester, I reflect on my lesson plans, revise them, and resubmit them back to my students to ensure that the strategies I use in the classroom are useful. I actively encourage verbal and written feedback, and I try to ascertain, through questions and the bright (or blank) faces, how to adjust to meet my students’ needs. For example, some students learn statistics quickly (and get easily bored), while others in the same class are having mild anxiety attacks at the thought of standard deviations, t-tests and ANOVAs. If I get silence when I ask how a boxplot and a histogram are different, then I stop, have my students’ plot both graphs, and we walk through the differences together. I welcome questions, different points of view, and ask my students to listen with respect—even if they do not personally agree with someone’s perspective. Students have commented that my classroom “is a very comfortable environment” and that they “appreciate the inclusivity of the course”. Being flexible allows me to adjust to meet students learning needs, and it allows students to feel comfortable to discuss and ask questions. My students respond positively to this flexibility comment: “I admire your effort, flexibility, and kindness in teaching this course”, “You are a great communicator and you put the class on a more personal basis. This makes you very approachable and also keeps people awake.”

Conclusion

In sum, when I enter a classroom, my purpose is to give my students tools they need to become active learners and critical thinkers. I constantly adjust, revise, work with my students, and utilize different techniques to engage them in the learning process. I tell stories, I let my enthusiasm for psychology (even statistics!) come out, and I constantly ask questions. At the end of each semester, I leave my students with a few facts from class that I would like for them to take with them in the real world and keep in, what I call, their life backpack, such as considering a person's situation before making dispositional attributions (the fundamental attribution error) or to remind them that correlation does not equal causation. And, I remind myself that while I might not see immediate improvement or understanding during the hour or semester that I am with my students, that I have, hopefully, provided them with a few more tools they can take with them to become active learners and better critical thinkers. And the techniques I use are resulting in positive outcomes. My undergraduates have been co-authors on numerous manuscripts, are presenting their work at national and regional conferences, are winning awards for their work (e.g., the Berkowitz Award for Best Undergraduate Presentation at the New England Psychology Association two years in a row), and are attending top-notch graduate programs (i.e., Tufts University, Boston College). In addition, I received the 2012 Romeo L. Moruzzi Young Faculty Award for Innovations in Undergraduate Education. This is a university-wide award given to the most innovative teacher among the untenured faculty. I was awarded it for my innovations in revitalizing our undergraduate psychology program through empirical research.

Classes Currently Teaching:

Introduction to Psychology
Psychology of Gender
Research Methods and Data Analysis in Psychology
Social Psychology

Other Teaching Interests:

Cross-Cultural Psychology
Judgment and Decision Making
Psychology and Law
Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Discrimination
Social Psychology and the Real World (Applied Social)
Social Stigma