

Teaching Evaluations and Evidence
Jeanine L. Skorinko

Table 1. Course Evaluations.

Course	Term	N	Overall ^a Mean	Effective ^b Mean	Approachable ^c Mean
Introduction to Psychology	Fall 07	39	4.7	4.6	4.9
Statistics and Methods	Spring 08	6	4.3	4.5	4.8
Social Psychology	Spring 08	41	4.8	4.7	4.9
Social Psychology	Fall 08	50	4.7	4.6	4.8
Introduction to Psychology	Fall 08	52	4.6	4.6	4.8
Statistics and Methods	Fall 09	7	5.0	4.7	5.0
Introduction to Psychology	Fall 09	40	4.5	4.7	4.8
Psychology of Gender	Spring 10	39	4.5	4.7	4.9
Social Psychology	Spring 10	41	4.8	4.9	5.0
Introduction to Psychology	Fall 10	47	4.5	4.7	4.7
Social Psychology	Fall 10	36	4.6	4.8	4.8
Introduction to Psychology	Spring 11	41	4.7	4.6	4.9
Overall		439	4.6	4.7	4.9

^a Question: “My overall rating of the instructor’s teaching is. . .” ^b Question: “My instructor used course time effectively”
Question: “The instructor treated students with respect.” ^d The scale ranged from 1 *strongly disagree/poor* to 5 *strongly agree/excellent*.

Comments:

“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.”

“When I first chose to take this course the only expectations I had for the class was reading a lot about past experiments and studies performed years ago some a bunch of guys that are probably dead by now. I also expected to write a few papers about the boring studies that had be conducted years and years ago that would draw some sort of similarity to human behavior in social environments. But to my surprise, this course has been the entire opposite of that. While we did learn about human behavior in social situations, it was done in a totally different way than I expected. We did learn about past experiments but not from a boring book, and the studies were all performed by us. While books and papers may be a great way to preserve knowledge, they are not the most effective way to transmit it. Taking the same concepts and theories learned in class or from the reading and having us perform actual experiments in our day-to-day life was a great way to get me interested in the subject. It also made it much easier to relate to the material because now we are no longer just reading the results from a book but were actually experiencing them for our self. In general, this Social Psychology course helped me to start thinking in a more critical matter about my past (and even current) social interactions as well as better understand not only my own behavior but also those of the people that surround me in specific situations.”

“WPI’s motto is “theory and practice,” and the organization of this class, especially with respect to the assignments, achieves this nicely. The major homework assignments for the course provided “practice” to supplement the “theory” presented in lectures. Students are encouraged to perform small experiments for their journal entries, which I took advantage of. This was a really beneficial experience for me, as it motivated me to acquire in-depth knowledge of the topics at hand—in my case, conditioning and observational learning. Performing experiments exposes students to some of the problems faced by real psychologists, and is a helpful tool in deciding if they would like to further pursue education in Psychology. Another assignment is to relate a concept covered in class to a student’s personal life. I can’t think of any better way of achieving the course goal of acquiring “a lasting awareness

of just how widespread psychological principles are to daily lives.” Psychology is really a unique subject at WPI in that this can be a constructive and relevant goal for a course. I couldn’t imagine being asked to write about how lecture topics tie in to my personal life in a Computer Networks course. This is also a great way to keep students interested in the work—I mean, who isn’t interested in themselves? . . . I believe that the assignments are a great learning tool, and I don’t think I would have benefitted as much from any other style of homework assignment.”

“In the lectures, we were not only taught through theory introduction, but also were taught through vivid examples. For example, the classical conditioning example in the lecture of learning was such a remarkable experience. In this experiment, Professor Skorinko popped balloons to elicit a scare reaction (unconditioned response) and she paired the balloon-popping with a waving of her arm (a neutral stimulus that turned into a conditioned stimulus). When Professor Skorinko waved her arm for the third time, many of us felt scared—even though the balloon was not popped. This was a representative sample of the brilliant lecture we were taught, which stimulated us to learn the material more completely and more in depth.”

“One thing that appeals to me from this class is that we got the chance to do psychology experiments on our own and integrate them to the theories we learned in class”.

“I think this is a great class for engineering oriented individuals to take because it uses scientific methodologies to explain human attitudes and behaviors. . . .”

“That was something I liked about the course as a whole: that the readings and lectures focused a lot on the experiments performed, and real-life examples, presented in a much more anecdotal fashion than any other subject I’ve studied.”

“I learned more about statistics and research in this class than I did in previous courses that dealt *only* with statistics. . . the instruction is the best I’ve seen at this school.”

“I thought the professor was amazing at keeping the lectures interesting, especially for a 2 hour class at 8 AM. She used a great balance of lecturing, class experiments, and other displays of what we were learning. I have already told everyone interested in psychology to take this course with Professor Skorinko”.

“I was fascinated by some studies that were done and I will definitely keep an eye on psychology research from now on because I find it very interesting to try to explain behaviors and attitudes in particular.”

“I have learned a lot from this course, while my grade may not be what I’d like it to be. I have learned to alter my thought process so I may think more analytically and to question my own thoughts so they may not be biased. In the end this class was worth it for me, in large part because of the assignments that [made the material] and readings seem real. This is the most difficult course I have ever taken, and in the end it was worth it.”

Teaching Award Nomination (Unsolicited From My Department Chair)

To the members of the Educational Development Council --

I am writing in support of Prof. Jeanine Skorinko's nomination for the 2010 Romeo L. Moruzzi Young Faculty Award for Innovation in Undergraduate Education. I know that the main focus of this award is on specific teaching innovations. However, before discussing that I am compelled to discuss her general excellence as a teacher. Prof. Skorinko is far and away the best instructor in the SSPS Department. Her courses are very thoughtfully organized and student focused. She employs a variety of interactive learning techniques (e.g., demonstrations in which the students act as subjects) in the classroom to maintain student interest and drive home key concepts with a personal experience. She has an uncanny ability to relate to her students and to see things from their perspective (much of her research, after all, is on the topic of perspective taking). Her courses are not just courses: they become seamlessly integrated into her students’ lives through class assignments (e.g., having students keep a journal throughout the term of how what they are reading and learning about relates to their personal experiences; or assigning them to break a social norm and write about the experience). Prof. Skorinko will literally do whatever is necessary to help students learn, up to and including dancing on a table top during class. (I’m not making that up.)

In three short years Prof. Skorinko has revitalized our undergraduate psychology program by incorporating a variety of innovations in 3 different courses, all centered around the theme of engaging students in research or systematic observation. Her students learn psychology and learn to appreciate psychological research methods by conducting and participating in research, ranging from classroom demonstrations, to term projects, to real research conducted in the Social Psychology Inquiry (SPI) lab. I will focus on two innovations in particular: her revision of our Research Methods course (SS2400) and her establishment of a Human Subjects Research Pool at WPI.

In SS2400 she has taken the typical sophomore-level research methods course and transformed it into the equivalent of a graduate seminar. Students experience the entire research process from start to finish, including a final public poster session that invades the campus center near the end of the term. The research that the students conduct in this course is not typical coursework: it is linked with the ongoing research program in the SPI lab and is of publishable quality. Psychology majors come out of this course not only ready to do their MQPs, but practically having already done one. It is worth noting that Prof. Skorinko offers this kind of research mentorship to any interested undergraduates in her psychology courses, and several non-majors have taken her up on it, gaining research skills that translate into their major field.

By establishing a human subjects research pool for the first time at WPI, Prof. Skorinko has done much more than help educate students in psychology courses about research: she has ensured that hundreds of WPI students each year will gain first hand experience of what it is like to be a human subject and what a researcher needs to do to protect the rights of subjects. As a result of Prof. Skorinko's efforts, the psychology courses at WPI are one of the few places in the WPI curriculum where students explicitly, and personally, confront important ethical questions. This experience will serve them well later on in their undergraduate careers, when most of them will be on the other side, collecting information and data from people in the course of their IQPs. As a former member of WPI's Institutional Review Board, I can attest to the ongoing need to educate WPI students about the rights of human subjects, and I believe this early introduction to important ethical standards early in students' careers will greatly aid the work of the IRB.

It is worth noting that creating a human subject pool from scratch and managing it each term is not a trivial undertaking: Prof. Skorinko has prepared a variety of materials to educate instructors teaching courses with a research participation requirement for the first time, as well as new researchers conducting experiments that use the pool. Each term, she monitors and manages the pool to ensure that students are able to register for experiments and obtain credit for participation. The subject pool provides a valuable service not just to psychologists in the SSPS Dept., but also to faculty in other departments (e.g., MG and CS) at WPI (and their students) who conduct research on human subjects.

In summary, I believe that Prof. Skorinko's innovative approach to involving undergraduates in research early and often has greatly benefited our psychology students, giving them a decided edge when it comes time to apply to graduate school. It has also helped improve the general quality of human subjects research on campus by (a) providing hundreds of students each year an early exposure to the rights of human subjects and the responsibilities of researchers that will serve them well when they go on to conduct interviews, surveys, and focus groups in their IQPs and (b) providing student researchers and their faculty advisors a convenient way to obtain appropriate, unbiased samples for their research.

I would also like to mention some recent developments that show the increasing impact of Prof. Skorinko's teaching innovations. This year, for the first time students taking economics courses have begun participating in the subject pool. This means that Prof. Skorinko's innovations will reach many more WPI students (perhaps double the number) than in previous years. Also: we are starting to see some pretty remarkable outcomes from students who have gone through Prof. Skorinko's research oriented teaching program. In 2009 one of her undergraduate students, Craig DiGiovanni, won The Norman H. Berkowitz Undergraduate Experimental Research Paper Award at the 2009 meeting of the New England Psychological Association (NEPA). What is particularly noteworthy about this is Craig was not a psychology major; instead I'm pretty sure he is the only chemical engineering major to ever win that particular award. There is significant competition for this award from students at other institutions with much larger numbers of psychology faculty and psychology majors than WPI. Yet another one of Prof. Skorinko's students won the award in 2010, Casey McKenna. In 2010 still another one of Prof. Skorinko's students, Satia Miller, made a peer-reviewed research presentation at a prestigious national conference (the 8th Biennial Society for the

Psychological Study of Social Issues convention in New Orleans, LA) . . . as a sophomore and the youngest presenter at the entire conference.

Prof. Skorinko can apparently turn UGs into graduate students by their sophomore year. I think that pretty much says it all.

Regards,

Jim Doyle
Head, SSPS Dept.

Teaching Award Nomination (Unsolicited From A Former Student)

Dr. Jeanine Skorinko is more than my favorite professor and advisor; she's also my personal role model. She is more passionate about her job than anyone I have ever met and never ceases to go above and beyond what is required. She holds her students to high standards both inside the classroom and out and has truly pushed me to achieve more than I thought possible in my time here at WPI.

Being a Psychological Sciences major and being very involved on campus, I receive a lot of questions from my peers about what psychology classes they should take. I ALWAYS tell them to take a class with Professor Skorinko if they can. My common recommendation taken straight from my email is "take a class with Prof. Skorinko – she teaches to various learning styles and is creative and upbeat and even gives out candy. Be ready to genuinely enjoy learning again and work your butt off in the process."

Professor has a very hands-on approach to learning that all WPI students can appreciate in contrast with the many matter-of-fact math and sciences offered. She takes the course material and tries to make exciting connections to popular media and everyday experiences. For example, in her Psychology of Gender class she demonstrated gender stereotypes by playing some top 40 songs and reflecting on their message. She also implements in-class interactive exercises to demonstrate theories we are discussing. Again, in Psychology of Gender she made conversation pairs stand and different lengths from each other and asked pair to rate how comfortable they felt. This showed us how males and females interact differently by differential personal space boundaries.

At the same time, Professor Skorinko's classes aren't all fun and games. She is diligently working to break down the perception that psychology is easy. Her tests are quite difficult and require active attention in class, textbook reading, and intensive studying to make an A on her exams. Apart from her exams, Professor Skorinko also assigns meaningful assignments such as journal entries, group debates, participation in research experiments, as well as asking her students to break a social norm and reflect on the experience in an essay. I don't think a single person could escape one of her classes without both learning a great deal about psychology and bursting out laughing on multiple occasions. At the very least students will smile once per class when she passes around candy or baked goods halfway through the 2-hour class to keep everyone attentive (and forming positive associations with her class).

Professor Skorinko is also actively working to improve the burgeoning Social Sciences department on campus. She was heavily involved with the new hiring of Professor John in the spring for this academic year. She has brought in various speakers to present to the department faculty and students. Last week, Paul Poteat PhD from Boston College came to present about his research and the pair are planning future collaboration to broaden the range of psychology research being conducted on this campus. Professor Skorinko single handedly runs the psychology research lab that was established since her hiring that many psychology major and minor students conduct their research in. Last year she developed a new Psychological Sciences advising plan the likes of which the department never had, and that students greatly appreciated. Additionally, she organized the founding and is the current advisor of Psychology Society. Still an up and coming club, Professor Skorinko has big plans to turn this club into a Psi Chi (Psychology Honors Society) once the school has sufficient majors who qualify.

Speaking of research, Dr. Skorinko has encouraged me to do more research than I thought was ever possible. In her Research Methods class, I did a group mini-MQP project that helped me get a feel for social science research and led me to ask about MQP opportunities. One of my favorite qualities about Dr. Skorinko is that she is a YES person. Therefore it was no surprise that when I timidly walked into her office asking about MQP opportunities, she welcomed me in and excitedly gave me about five options of things she'd love for me to work on. A year later, I have completed my MQP successfully, won the Provost award for my research, presented at the New England Psychological Association conference, won an additional award for my research, and have an upcoming publication in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. I'm not an overwhelming exception either; Professor Skorinko makes it a personal goal to have each of her project students' work get published. Even after my MQP is over, we're working together in an independent study to examine the topic of sexual identity disclosure and its relationship with mental health. This is something completely outside of her usual research that she went out of her way to make connections and find research for me because of my personal interests and recent events.

Outside of her duties as a professor, she is also invested in her students' academic development. Dr. Skorinko is not my academic advisor (and I have two), but she has become my go to person while I am applying to graduate school. She has inadvertently taken on this role for me because she *asks* and is *genuinely interested* in where I'm going academically. She encouraged me on my route to taking the GREs, and has provided comments on my resume without me asking, and has already drafted a letter of recommendation for me – that I haven't asked her for yet! It's not just me, Professor Skorinko is involved with many students and is constantly hoping to help them find their way in the world of psychology. She offers help making resumes, exploring career paths, and getting her students the right experience and contacts to go where they would like to go. In December, she is even bringing a new program from the CDC that she has been helping them develop about post-graduation plans in the social sciences.

Even more, Professor Skorinko is interested in her students' success outside of the classroom. I can't tell you how many emails she sends me about upcoming awards she considers me eligible for telling me to nominate myself or apply for a scholarship or present my research. She nominated me for my current Peer Academic Coaching job that I hold in the Academic Resource Center. When we were attending a conference in Burlington, VA this fall she even encouraged me to buy my new favorite winter hat. It's a silly example, but I just wanted to emphasize that Dr. Skorinko can play the role of academic advisor and friendly encouraging staff member at the same time.