

Teaching Philosophy

I have developed my teaching philosophy over the past 24 years as I have been engaged in various types of teaching at a handful of very different institutions. I began teaching as a graduate student in 1992, when I was a member of Gary Stasser's lab at Miami University. Initially, this meant leading lab meetings and supervising undergraduate research assistants. I taught my first course as the instructor of record about four years later, under duress. My advisor informed me that I was required to teach a course in order to meet the university requirements for my Ph.D. My guiding principle was to get through the semester without fainting as a result of my public speaking phobia. It was during this semester that I developed the beginnings of my teaching philosophy: learning takes place in an environment where anxiety is minimized. I always have in the back of my mind the students for whom participating in class is painful. I remember that feeling well, and in an effort to meet as many students' needs as possible, I try a variety of approaches in my teaching. I do not believe that one size fits all; good teaching is flexible and involves multiple presentation styles and good communication with the students for feedback about what is working and what is not working. I also believe that learning takes place when students are motivated to see connections between new material and material that they have learned in other contexts. Learning occurs when they recognize principles that they have read about and discussed in class in their personal experiences. This awareness leads students to actively engage in the learning process – another key to learning. Students need to discuss, ask questions, and experience in order to learn. To me, learning is not about memorization. It is about being able to use information to become better “consumers” of our environments.

My Teaching Style

Great classes are classes that students want to attend. They are classes that students expect to be interesting and engaging, at least some of the time. I want students to find other people as fascinating as I do, and I want them to have a better understanding of why they do what they do. I am sure that my teaching philosophy is heavily influenced by the fact that the material I teach quite often has direct relevance to their lives. However, I believe that good teachers find a way to connect material with students, regardless of the content; teachers have to find the “hook” that gets their students' attention. One of the hallmarks of my teaching is that I show my students my excitement and surprise at the material that I present to them. And I encourage them to be curious and to delight in understanding the psychological processes underlying our own and others' behaviors. I point out the humor in our behavior, and I insist that they ask themselves questions to test what they think they already understand.

I believe that the best environment for learning is one where students participate and are involved in class, as opposed to passively receiving information. I encourage students to share stories and to give examples from their experiences as often as possible. I offer many types of participation in recognition of the variety of personalities and learning styles in each class. I define “participation” as being actively engaged in our discussions. For some students, this is non-verbal feedback and writing; for others this means leading small group discussions and

answering questions during lectures. I ask that all students try to find a way to participate, and I validate the differences in students' learning styles.

Evidence of Student Learning

Students demonstrate learning in a variety of ways. For most classes there are some core ideas and vocabulary that students have to master. Performance on multiple choice tests is generally a good way of assessing this type of learning. However, the more meaningful learning, in my opinion, is assessed by looking at students' application of principles when they are asked to write about them. When students are able to take what they have learned and apply it to novel situations, recognize principles in scenarios that I present to them, and find examples of what they have learned in contexts outside of the classroom, that is evidence of learning. I try to give students many different ways of demonstrating learning: they have exams with multiple choice questions as well as short answer questions, they write papers, and they write written reflections on classroom demonstrations. I encourage students to share news items, comics, and videos that they come across that exemplify class material, and I use these examples in class. The benefit of these exercises is that I can assess student learning in a low-stakes situation; students enjoy sharing these items and discussing them with one another.

Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Students come to class with different backgrounds, learning preferences, and abilities. It is important that none of our students feel excluded from the learning process. I tell my students in all of my classes, big and small, that we are going to treat our class as though it were a small seminar. I often encourage participation by pointing out that "It's just us!" I tell them that they need to remember that we are partners in the learning process. I admonish them that they will benefit from contributing to our classroom time with their questions and ideas. Because I frequently rely on a Socratic method of asking questions and facilitating discussion, I am alert for students who might offend others (most often inadvertently) or who monopolize class time. My approach is to recognize the speaker's point and to re-direct or ask others in the class to respond to the points made by a student. I believe that these strategies work when a classroom norm of trust and respect is established early in the semester.

Strategies and Activities

My teaching strategies and the kinds of classroom activities that I use reflect the value that I put on active learning and on application. I provide a context for all of the material that I present and each of the assignments that I give so that students know what I think the objectives are. I find that giving students this explicit direction motivates them and helps them to organize the material. I create partial replication exercises to accompany my presentation of research findings. I demonstrate concepts in class by having students come to the front of the class and participate in some activity. Some classes are flipped: they read to prepare for class and spend the class time in small groups discussing the material and writing a response. I create experiences in class that

help elucidate concepts that they have read about. In my larger classes I ask questions using “clickers” so that students can immediately and anonymously see what their classmates are thinking/how they are reacting. I have some assignments that are meant to be “formative,” where they receive credit for completion and are thus low-stakes. Other assignments are “summative” where they actually receive grades. The combination of these types of assignments allows students to practice their learning with less pressure and also the opportunity to show their learning and to earn their grades.

Goals for Myself and for Students

My goals as a teacher are to continue to develop better ways to engage students in course material. I have yet to deliver a course the same way two semesters in a row, as I am constantly finding new research to present, new demonstrations to try, and new technologies that might be useful. I strive to improve upon my current presentations and look for new and better ways to structure my classes. I attend teaching seminars at the Center for Teaching Excellence, where I learn from faculty members in other departments who are also interested in improving their teaching. Lastly, I would really like to extend my teaching and mentoring to students who work as teaching assistants in the department. There are few opportunities for undergraduates and graduate students to learn how to teach. I would like to develop a course for students who are interested in pedagogy and who aspire to careers that will involve teaching. These classes would make our graduates (at both the undergraduate and at the graduate level) better prepared for the teaching they may be expected to do once they leave Rice. It would also enhance the teaching experiences that they are already investing time in when they TA for a class; they would learn more than how to grade papers and follow rubrics.

Another goal I have is to provide my students with an opportunity for mentoring. When students come to Rice, we tell them that our small size enables students to get to know their professors. Not all students want to avail themselves of those opportunities. But my goal is to show my students that I am open to those relationships; I am available to discuss research, topics they find particularly interesting, future courses of study, and plans for their life after Rice. I have been told by students that they were intimidated by the idea of going to office hours or meetings with professors outside of class, until they had a class with me. They learn from me that these mentors do exist for them at Rice, even if they do not choose to seek me out for this role.

My ultimate goal for my students is for them to gain a better understanding of their worlds. With better understanding comes power: the power to make changes and to shape their environments in ways that are beneficial to themselves and to those around them. With increased understanding of why people do what they do comes fewer misunderstandings and increased satisfaction in relationships. To that end, I want them to be skeptical of what they read and to look for evidence to support their conclusions. I want them to learn what questions to ask when they read primary research and secondary sources of information. I want my students to learn tools that they can use in the “real world.” I want them to continue to think about psychology and to use what they have learned long after they are out of my classrooms and out of school.