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Teaching Statement

When I reflect on how I teach and what I want my students to take away from my courses three main things come to mind: active learning, critical thinking and application of course material to everyday life. I believe it is essential to recognize that students bring their own knowledge of topics into my classroom and that knowledge can be a useful pedagogical tool.

In addition, I believe that one of the most important variables in student learning is the learning environment. I strive to make the classroom a safe environment in which students feel comfortable posing questions or reflecting on material throughout the class period. I break my lectures into small segments containing a concise message consolidating the section. Importantly, this structure encourages questions and affords students a clear opportunity to speak about the course materials. Students often approach me before and after class to discuss topics that we covered. I believe that these impromptu meetings between teacher and student are essential to reaching those students who might not otherwise have spoken up in class.

Active Learning

Active learning exercises are an essential component of each of my class sessions. I believe that students learn more when they are engaged in the learning process rather than passively absorbing information in a lecture. This engagement creates excitement in the student–an emotion essential for any sustained learning endeavor. Furthermore, empirical research suggests that active learning increases student learning (Bruner, 1961). In addition, the appropriate timing of active learning exercises throughout the class period helps break the lecture into small manageable parts.

I create an active learning environment for my students through the use of critical thinking group exercises and in-class demonstrations. For example, I often ask students to illustrate a concept individually and then discuss their illustrations with their neighbors. This activity requires that students explain concepts to one another making them an active participant while further enriching their understanding of the concepts in class. In one exercise utilized in my lecture on research methods, students are instructed to split into small groups and design experiments to test a hypothesis imagining that they had unlimited funds and facilities. Students then share their experiments with the rest of the class. This exercise forces students to generate examples of concepts with their classmates and weigh the benefits and limitations of each idea. I believe this collaborative generation of content from recently gained knowledge is essential for students to fully understand a concept.

I also engage students through in-class demonstrations. For instance, in our discussion of learning, I lead the class in a shaping exercise which culminates in the shaping of an individual's behavior through a simple reward–clapping. Students are amazed at the ease with which they are able to condition complex behaviors in their classmates through the use of simple rewards. Further, to introduce the concept of social learning, I then have another individual from the class emulate the same behavior with no reward from the class. I then ask the class to carefully consider how the second individual could have learned this through classic learning theory (i.e., classical and operant conditioning). Students eventually draw the conclusion that the learning could not be explained through classic or operant conditions. I then introduce the idea of social learning through the use of modeling. The shaping exercise requires students' active participation in their learning while simultaneously forcing them to think critically about the knowledge it confirms and the new questions it raises.

Critical Thinking

Learning how to think critically about information is a beneficial skill for all students. Critically evaluating information, no matter the source, transcends the classroom and aids students in other aspects of their lives. It enables students to accurately assess and understand information in all forms–research or otherwise. Moreover, critical thinking excites students and raises their curiosity in the particular subject matter by bringing to light questions and their possible answers.

I begin teaching critical thinking from the first day of class and touch on it frequently throughout the semester. I use in-class demonstrations, multimedia, creative writing, and small-group activities to illustrate the process of thinking critically about information. I explicitly tell students that they should be critically examining all of the course material and constantly questioning the validity of the arguments therein. Implicitly, I model critical thinking by analyzing arguments for and against the each concept taught in the class. In addition, I often use critical thinking demonstrations to illustrate how this style of thinking helps individuals make less biased decisions. In one demonstration, I proposed a riddle and asked the class to critically think about the answer. Students pose yes or no questions in order to obtain information to solve the riddle. Upon solving the riddle, I then return to their questions and ask them to reflect on how their fallacious assumptions and repeated inaccurate speculations lead to their inability to solve the riddle. I additionally highlight the amount of information that can be gained by simple yes or no questioning and parallel their experiences to the scientific process. This exercise is important as students must first think critically about the riddle and then think critically about their own thought processes while trying to reach the correct answer. In my discussion of social influence in my social psychology course, I show common infomercials seen on television and ask students to critically analyze them for the

existence of the social influence principals. This exercise encourages students to think critically about the material and also connects the material to their daily lives.

In addition to emphasizing critical thinking in the classroom, I also try to develop students' critical thinking skills at a deeper level by requiring that they write a paper on a concept that they can critically analyze. Past introduction to psychology topics include a pre-determined social norm violation (e.g., singing loudly to themselves in a store or holding the door for a stranger) and the creation of a ten-item scale to measure abstract concepts (e.g., love or personality).

Psychology In Daily Life

I believe it is imperative that students connect the course material to their daily life. When students are able to see the course concepts transcend the classroom in the natural world around them it excites them and creates lasting memories. I make students aware of psychology's relevance in every aspect of the course. One method I utilize for this purpose is incorporating contemporary media in my lectures. I arrive early before each class session and play a song related to the day's lecture topic while students arrive (e.g., 41 shots by Bruce Springsteen to illustrate automatic prejudice; Brian Wilson by the Bare Naked Ladies to illustrate classical conditioning). I inform students that each song they will hear throughout the semester has a connection to the day's lecture. Making the connection between the song and course content allows students to understand that the concepts in the days lecture have real-world effects. Additionally, I use contemporary sitcoms or movies to illustrate concepts learned in class. For example, I show students a clip from the television show The Office illustrating the concept of classical conditioning. I then ask students to identify the core components of classical conditioning (e.g., unconditioned stimulus) in the clip. This exercise forces students to think critically about the concept of classical conditioning while showing that the concept has transcended the classroom. Finally, my goal is to make the classroom only a small part of students learning experience. I encourage my students to speak with others about the demonstrations and topics they learn in my class. These dialogues consolidate concepts in students minds.

Through my teaching style, classroom structure, and methods, I strive to provide a student-centered learning environment that makes students feel comfortable to ask questions, critically think about the topic material, and relate the material to their daily lives. I am constantly analyzing and examining my teaching style and methods looking for more efficient ways of accomplishing the above goals and creating a better learning experience for my students. It is my hope that students who leave my course not only gain knowledge about a specific topic area but also gain insight into their personal views through the careful and respectful evaluation of others' perspectives.