

Teaching Philosophy

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In reflecting on my own experiences as a college student, graduate student, and now as an instructor in psychology, I've come to appreciate the value in intellectual exchanges – both in and out of the classroom. Those conversations draw connections between science, theory, and daily life, have direct applications, and foster critical and creative thinking. My goals as an instructor are to provide learning opportunities and to create a learning environment that facilitates these objectives. Moreover, I believe that I am most able to meet my teaching goals when I approach teaching expecting to learn.

Drawing connections between science, theory, and everyday life

In psychology, I believe that helping students draw connections between science, theory, and daily life is a key goal. In some ways, psychology's intuitive appeal both helps and hinders progress towards this goal. On one hand, concepts in psychology seem to naturally hit on students' interests. It is rare to find a student who has absolutely no opinion about basic questions of human nature: Why do good people do bad things? How do we learn new things? How is it that some people get stuck in depression and seem unable to disentangle themselves? The list goes on. While psychology's intuitive appeal certainly guarantees rousing classroom discussions, its intuitive appeal can also lull students into intellectual complacency and result in the laying-aside of empirical evidence and the blurring of connections between science, theory, and practice. To counteract this, I attempt to link students' natural observations to research – sometimes even my own. For example, in discussing social learning theory and the development of aggression in children, I highlight my own research suggesting that children learn aggressive conflict behaviors by observing their parents engage in aggressive marital conflict and parenting behaviors. Moreover, I attempt to highlight how psychologists through the ages have made observations, developed theories, and tested their theories to provide empirical support for our everyday, “commonsense” observations. I believe that helping students identify these links between theory, research, and their lives is essential.

Highlighting direct applications

Not only is it important for students to understand how theory and research might support or contradict their real life observations, but it is also essential – and exciting – when students begin to apply psychological concepts to their own life. I believe that my job as an instructor is to help material come alive for students in this way. Through classroom discussions, I have observed that highlighting personal applications of psychological principles and asking students to volunteer their own engages students more deeply and enhances their encoding of course material. I also try to help students apply concepts to their own life by assigning periodic reaction papers that take a personal turn. For example, instead of asking students to recapitulate the major learning theories in their papers, I ask them to tell me about something they have learned and how they learned it – either through classical conditioning, operant conditioning, or observational learning. Likewise instead of asking for their simple reactions to the Zimbardo prison study, I ask them to tell me how they would behave as a prisoner or guard and how sure they are in their prediction. I am pleasantly pleased with the degree to which students, as a whole, draw parallels with their own lives and express increased insight about their own capacities to do wrong.

Think critically and creatively about psychological concepts

I believe that students who are engaged in academic material at a personal level will be more likely to think critically and creatively about those same concepts. I often attempt to ask questions that will lead students to engage with material in this way. For example, in discussing research findings regarding the stability of temperament and attachment over the lifespan, my class then turned to a discussion of what factors or experiences might lead to changes in these two domains. Students shared various personal experiences (e.g., parental divorce seemingly resulted in less secure attachment for one student), and we ultimately turned to the research in this area for empirical answers. In addition, I have found that even failed in-class experiments can prove useful in leading students to identify factors that could account for the results and to craft new research studies.

Teaching as a learning experience

I believe that I am most able to accomplish my teaching goals when I approach teaching as a learning experience for me. While I sometimes find myself bumping up against students' limitations and needing to tailor the course accordingly, I also find myself surprised and gratified by students' insightful comments and creative questions. It is a joy when students lead me to think about psychological concepts in new ways, and at these times, I see that I can push their intellectual boundaries even more. I think that it is important for me to share my appreciation for students' creativity and thinking and to see teaching as a mutual process of learning. I believe that this approach to teaching creates an environment of mutual respect where true intellectual exchanges can occur.