

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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“Education must provide the opportunities for self-fulfillment; it can at best provide a rich and challenging environment for the individual to explore, in his own way.”—Noam Chomsky

Teaching Philosophy

I think Chomsky meant that an academic should not act as the authority over education, but as a guide that assists students as they are educated. Thus, I view my role as a *professor*, not an *instructor* of information. Rather than instructing students how to learn a black box list of facts about psychology I try to profess knowledge in a way that encourages students to think critically and develop mental tools they can use to explore psychological topics. Having students work at problems and think through solutions is more important than providing answers, and providing opportunities for students to challenge themselves academically and personally is consistent with a commitment to a “life of the mind.” As such, I do not view education having a beginning and end, but as being an on-going process.

Being schooled in the cognitive sciences I know that two of the more fundamental principles for creating an effective learning environment are attention and elaboration. Attention to material is achievable by presenting topics that are challenging, interesting, fun, and relevant. Elaboration is achieved by encouraging critical thinking in class and through assignments as well as by meeting with students to continue our class discussions. Thus, I deliver my classes based on the following principles:

Active open-mindedness (student engagement). Active participation in the learning process is essential. If students keep thinking, mental connections will form between new material and existing knowledge. I prefer to introduce topics and have students contribute to discussions by asking questions, having students predict outcomes of studies, and ask for examples of topics rather than use only my own examples.

Relevance. Because the topics and concepts in psychology can be abstract and artificial I include examples to show how the concepts can be applied. For example, in PSYC 230 I cover Detection Theory, which explains judgment-making in the face of uncertainty and I teach students to interpret measures of judgment sensitivity and bias. Instead of relying on lab studies I explain sensitivity and bias using examples like a radiologist screening x-rays to make cancer diagnoses. Doing this shows students the relevance of psychological topics outside of the lab and classroom.

Clear objectives. Students work best when the course objectives are clear, challenging but achievable, and connected to course topics. Assignments that are overly difficult or vague cause frustration and easy assignments do not encourage thinking. I give students a detailed syllabus that explains the objectives, lists my expectations, and breaks down the grade I also explain the relevance of each assignment as they are discussed in class.

Identify confusions early. Professors should never move onto complex topics without setting a foundation on which those topics are based. This is especially true in PSYC 210 where the topics are cumulative. I use homework in all courses and return assignments by the next meeting. As I check homework I provide feedback on errors and if I notice a common error across students I address the issue in the next class meeting.

Let some mistakes happen. Showing students the right answer whenever a mistake is made does not allow students an opportunity to think through their mistake. If a student answers a question incorrectly during class I follow with a question that is intended for the student to rethink their answer. If they struggle I ask other students to contribute. The result is that learning from mistakes becomes a collective experience.

Be current and informed. I continually revise class materials based on what did and did not work in previous semesters and I scan the literature for recent research related to the course topics. This prepares me for almost anything that comes up during class and allows me to go into each meeting confident that what I present is current. For example, when I covered human attention in PSYC 234 I discussed a recent study (Dodd, Hibbing & Smith, 2011) that showed political orientation influences attention. While students agreed that political attitude would influence things like decision-making, they found it surprising that it also influences something ‘simple’ like human attention.

Be available. If students perceive me as being uninterested in their learning, they will be uninterested. I tell students in every class that if they need help they should see me. I hold regular office hours, but I also tell students to stop by my office any time. I maintain an updated calendar on my website (www.humanattention.org) that is also available on each course’s website so students will know when I am available to help. I also respond to emails quickly, which students have told me they greatly appreciate.

It is through these principles that I deliver my courses. Although most of the courses I teach are lower-division and focus on one area of psychology, my expectations, requirements, and general pedagogy do not differ from how I deliver upper-division courses.