
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Psychologists have empirical knowledge about the ways in which humans behave. As an educator, I apply my understanding of human behavior and mental processes to inform and excite my students. By using my knowledge of psychological phenomena, I try to create a classroom environment that optimizes my students' learning.

Implicit Theories of Intelligence: Teaching that effort produces results

People view failure in different ways. Entity theorists attribute their failures to a lack of intelligence. Incremental theorists, however, attribute their failures to a lack of effort (Dweck, 1999). Research consistently finds that incremental theorists are more successful than entity theorists in numerous domains. This is because, when incremental theorists fail, they attribute their subpar performance to a lack of effort and, in turn, work harder to overcome their failures in the future. One way to foster an incremental theory is to give praise for effort (e.g., "You must have worked really hard") rather than for ability (e.g., "You must be really smart"). As such, I give only effort feedback, praising students' hard work and not their innate intelligence. Further, when students come to me about a disappointing grade, I encourage them to reflect on whether they really put in the effort required to get their desired grade. Most students realize that additional effort is needed, and they put forth that effort to perform well on subsequent exams. My goal is to encourage students to attribute their failures to a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability. As a result, I find that students are motivated to work hard in the future to avoid failures.

Sources of Motivation: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

People have different reasons for pursuing and accomplishing goals. Likewise, students have different motivations for taking classes and doing well in them. Each semester, I start my courses by highlighting the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. I discuss how students of both motivational types can pass my course, but students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to thrive than students who are extrinsically motivated. I present course material in interesting ways, so students will want to come to class even though attendance is not mandatory. I do this by using personally relevant examples, pictures, and video clips. This strategy works. My courses are well attended, and most of my students work hard to learn the material. In both formal and informal evaluations, my students often report that they enjoyed coming to class and learned to invest personally in their own education, and that together, these things facilitated their learning of the material. By understanding the study of motivation, I strive to create an environment in which students want to learn.

Acceptance: Satisfying the Need to Belong

Just like breathing and eating are fundamental needs, having social connections is a fundamental, psychological need. Being away from established social support networks, students often struggle during their first year at college. I try to help students fulfill this need to belong by establishing meaningful connections both among students and between my students and me. To foster friendships between students, I regularly provide class time for students to meet one another and work together. I also create an optional class Facebook group for my students. Those who elect to join the group are able to meet other students in the class, share notes and examples, and create study groups. I also encourage students to attend events on campus. To foster a relationship between my students and me, I learn the names of all of my students, notice when they are not in class, and email them to let them know that their presence was missed. Additionally, I share personal stories that illustrate class concepts, so students feel like they really get to know me. College can be a time of social connection or isolation. I do my best to encourage the former.

Critical Thinking: The skills are more important than the major

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) recently released the results of a survey of employers. They found that 93% of respondents agreed that a student's ability to think critically was more important than his or her major. Students become psychology majors for a variety of reasons, but many land in our discipline because they have not yet decided on a career path. The results from this survey suggest that it is more important for students to hone their critical thinking skills while in college than to be proficient in any particular discipline. As a faculty member in a department with one of the top three largest majors and the largest minor, I take personal responsibility in helping my students to fine tune their critical thinking skills. I create assignments that ask students to identify misleading language, magical thinking, and blind appeals to authority used in the popular media. I also prioritize helping students understand the difference between correlational data and experimental data, with causal conclusions being drawn only from the latter, by creating in-class activities that bring these concepts to life. My goal is to engage students in dialogs that require them to challenge their preconceived notions by examining quality evidence.

Teaching: An evolving process

With training, every educator can improve his or her teaching. To refine my skills as a professor, I seek out training at many levels. I read teaching publications, attend and present at teaching conferences and workshops, subscribe to teaching-related email lists, and engage in teaching-related dialogue with colleagues. These instructional enhancement workshops have been beneficial, as I have already received awards for my teaching. Further, I make it a point to attend other colleagues' classes and regularly invite them to my classes. The exchange of teaching-related ideas between colleagues in other departments has proven to be extremely beneficial. I am committed to evolving as an educator by becoming more actively involved in the teaching of psychology community both on campus and nationwide.