

Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is grounded in self-reflection, diversity and self-efficacy. Specifically, I believe that my role as a teacher is to help students explore their place in the world, embrace their own diversity as well as that of their peers and promote self-efficacy. I try to achieve these goals by creating an engaging learning environment, using diversity as a teaching tool and by providing my students with guidance. These goals are important to how I conceptualize teaching because I view learning as a process that should include personal as well as intellectual growth. I believe that attending to these aspects in teaching provides students with a dynamic learning experience that allows them to achieve understanding of course material through active discovery. Below, using examples from my own teaching I explain in greater detail how I try to achieve these teaching goals.

Creating an Engaging Atmosphere

Student success in a course is directly tied to the degree to which students feel engaged in course material. Therefore I actively try to promote an engaging learning environment when I teach. One of the primary ways I achieve this is by showing my enthusiasm for the material that I am teaching. Educators cannot expect students to be interested in course material if we do not convey our own enthusiasm. When introducing myself at the start of the semester I let students know that I find social psychology particularly appealing because I get to study social issues that are important to me. It allows me to get students engaged in the course material by encouraging them to study issues that are important to them whenever possible. I have found this to be effective in all my classes, particularly in research methods where students spend the semester designing, conducting and writing up their own experimental studies. When students choose topics that they are interested in not only do I find that their projects are of higher quality, but they are also more engaged in class when we discuss research methodologies because it is easier for them to reflect on methods and statistics that are pertinent to their own research.

Using Diversity as a Teaching Tool

Psychology classes attract students from different academic and cultural backgrounds. Being a multiracial person (Black and Native, though I self-identify as Black), who has lived in two of the most culturally diverse cities in the world (Vancouver and Toronto), respecting diversity has always been important to me. But even in the most diverse settings there is the potential for individuals who are members of minority groups to feel isolated. Therefore it is important for teachers to be cognizant of diversity in their classrooms and find opportunities to use it to facilitate learning. When it comes to managing students academic backgrounds, the challenge is to start out at a level that does not require much prior knowledge while at the same time not alienating people who already know a lot. I accomplish this by getting to know students' academic backgrounds at the beginning of class, and often ask students with a strong background in a particular area to provide their opinions on topics when appropriate. I call upon a variety of people and ask for their expertise so that everyone feels included and valued. I also use diversity to promote experiential learning. For example, when serving as a tutor/marker for a course on intergroup relations students had to write a paper about their experiences as a member of a disadvantaged group. When students would ask me for direction on their papers, I told them to take the assignment as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as a member of a disadvantaged social group that might not be highly politicized, but might be very important to them (e.g., being an ESL student, being an international student). I also encouraged them to reflect on their experiences as a member of an advantaged social group to better understand how one's position in a social hierarchy can lead to different life outcomes.

Providing Guidance

One aspect of course work where I spend a lot of time providing guidance is with student's writing. I do this because students often underestimate the amount of writing involved in psychology. Also the "technical" writing we are required to do in psychology can differ immensely from other social science disciplines. The discrepancy between student's expectations for writing in psychology courses and reality can be a source of anxiety for students. As a result my comments on student's writing are frequently directed at helping students transfer their ideas into writing. While providing this feedback I always try to highlight what students do well, while providing constructive feedback and ideas for improvement. Additionally, the guidance I provide students goes beyond helping them learn course material. I often use my office hours to advise students on their career goals. I have also provided students with feedback on their personal statements and written them letters of recommendation. When I was an undergraduate student I had graduate students and professors who served as mentors to me and this mentorship benefited both my personal development as well as my career development; I try to emulate those who helped me by providing my students with guidance whenever possible.