

Teaching philosophy

John Alderete, March 2015

My courses in linguistics and cognitive science have specific educational goals that are spelled out in the course syllabi available from my Teaching page. These goals are integrated with the department's expected learning outcomes and the larger educational goals of the university. I see my role in teaching as a motivator that inspires students to achieve these goals via challenging material, and as a support person responsible for removing obstacles to learning and understanding.

Equal access and sensitivity to different learning styles

Given the multicultural society we live in, I know my classroom is made up of students with very different educational experiences and expectations. My lectures and in-class activities are created with the objective of reaching all my students. I find the best way to do this is explore a topic or problem from multiple angles, either illustrating it with many kinds of data or probing it with different methods. I also directly monitor student progress by assigning frequent assignments and trying to anticipate problems from students with different learning styles. I find that sensitivity to the diverse backgrounds of my students has many positive benefits because it encourages more cross-talk and an understanding of complex phenomena from multiple points of view.

Engaging students by inspiring interest and innovation

I find that many obstacles to learning can be overcome if students are excited about a topic and inspired to learn. It amazes me how fast students engage with the material and hypothesis-testing when presented with a good dataset, like an example from child phonology or an in-class elicitation with a native speaker. I find that students are much more willing to contribute and advance course goals when the materials provided to them are rich, interesting, and sufficiently broad in scope. It inspires active learning and innovation, rather than passive absorption of lecture material. I also try to generate enthusiasm by keeping my students abreast of current research trends and assigning articles from major journals in the field, e.g., *Language*, and more general journals like *Science*.

I'm a nursemaid, not a lecturer.

I see myself less as a lecturer handing down knowledge to blank slate students, and more as a nursemaid for students when they get stuck. Of course every investigation has prerequisite tools and concepts (e.g., phonetic symbols), and they must be laid out clearly. However, my teaching focuses on enabling students to use these tools to develop creative analyses, rather than asking students to commit them to memory. I have found that giving students clear methods and the responsibility for creating their own analyses is a far better way of reaching educational goals. This student-centered approach is especially important in teaching experimental linguistics and field methods, which require detailed analytical reasoning and creative insight from the student.

“Dr. Alderete’s class is not just about linguistics, it’s about learning how to think.”

I am always pleased to read in my evaluations that a student learned the material by achieving more general educational goals. Many of my students will not go on to be professional linguists. Therefore, while my classes have a clear linguistics focus, I want my students to walk away with more general thinking skills. For example, I hope students will have learned how to organize a dataset and extract patterns from it. I hope for them to learn how to identify problems of scientific importance and pursue clear hypotheses about them. Problem-solving, analytical reasoning, and cogent writing are important goals in all my classes, as well as quantitative reasoning and numeracy.