Teaching Philosophy

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My goal is to have my students leave my classes with more than a collection of memorized facts. I want them to have a holistic understanding of the material as well as improvement in skills, such as critical thinking and writing, that will continue to serve them in future academic and professional pursuits. In order to achieve this, I incorporate a variety of techniques, exercises, and demonstrations to keep the students engaged and challenged. I also believe that setting clear expectations at the beginning of the course and maintaining interpersonal communication throughout the course is critical to success.

I begin by looking at each lesson through the eyes of a student. Because we have become so familiar with the concepts we are teaching, we sometimes forget that our students do not have the same base of knowledge, so it helps to think back and remember what it was like to hear these lessons for the first time. I remember clearly the first time I saw pictures of a brain showing fMRI activation in a journal article. It was a pretty picture with different colored blobs on different areas of the brain, indicating that those areas of the brain were active. I had no idea how they got the colors to show up on the brain or what activation actually meant. That experience, and others like it, has shaped the way I organize my lectures. I consider how the lessons and concepts fit into the larger picture of what we are studying and make a point to relate each lesson to the overall goals of the course so that students do not get caught up in the details. My experience with fMRI also forced me to think about how to present material in several different ways. Last year, I began working with a student in the Department of Dramatic Arts and Media to create animations of concepts that are typically difficult to explain via PowerPoint and lecture. Together, we have created a number of short videos that I have been able to use in my classes (Please see http://vimeo.com/42844813 for an example).

Demonstrations and hands-on experiences can be particularly effective in teaching, and I use both throughout my courses. The Lab in Brain Imaging course that I have taught begins the semester with lectures, but during the second half of the course, the students collect data using 3 different types of neuroimaging equipment, and they end the semester by presenting research posters, similar to what they might do at a conference. The students benefit tremendously from the hands-on data collection, and it is incredibly gratifying to see them go from knowing very little about neuroimaging at the beginning of the semester to understanding it on a level that allows them to speak about it in front of their peers. These types of experiences not only make the concepts more applicable and less abstract, but they also help to prepare the students for the future, which is an essential part of my teaching philosophy.

Critical reading and writing are skills that students will need whether or not they decide to pursue a career in psychology. One of my undergraduate professors stressed the importance of critical thinking when reading journal articles. Through his class, I learned how to extract the relevant pieces of information in the methods sections of articles in order to better evaluate studies. It is a skill that helped me throughout graduate school and beyond, and I think it is just as useful in real-world situations when listening to the news or getting information online. In my Cognitive Psychology classes, I assign at least 3 article critiques per semester. These are short assignments, but they encourage the students to go beyond just reading the introduction and

discussion sections of the articles. They must think about why the study was done, how it could have been done differently, and what the article adds to the existing literature.

While the bulk of the responsibilities in the classroom fall on the teacher, I expect that the students will take an active role in their learning in order to get the most out of the class and the teacher. Over the past two years, I have learned that setting expectations early on is crucial. I have also found it helpful to check in with the students periodically over the course of the class. One way I have done this is by handing out index cards at the beginning of a lecture and asking students to write down something they do not understand or a concept that has been giving them trouble. I collect and go through these cards and answer the questions in subsequent classes. This gives me a good idea of where the students are and what changes I need to make. If there is communication between the teacher and the student, not simply information going from teacher to student, everyone, including the teacher, will have a richer educational experience.