

Teaching Philosophy

Teaching is an invitation to journey into a new way of understanding the world. It is a slow immersion into a subculture of scholars that has unique ways of thinking and speaking, progressively making what was once unfamiliar seem reasonable, and facilitating the adoption of a new way to approach old problems. One of my main teaching goals is to provide abundant signposts on this journey, in the hopes that students will not get lost along the way. Indeed, experimental research backs up the importance of good in-lecture structure, showing that students remembered more main points *and* details when the instructor explicitly organized the lecture by verbally linking content into a logical framework (see Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004). Four broad principles summarize the ways I set up signposts and structure my teaching: *clarity, complexity, accessibility, and integration.*

Clarity

Teaching rests on effectively transmitting a set of knowledge, a stance, or a vantage point to others. This begins by setting out the over-arching goals of the course, but also filters down into the details, making sure each learning moment connects explicitly with the other topics and the main course goal. Introducing students to a discipline or advancing them to the next stage is a process, requiring that each intermediate step be laid out clearly.

Above all, I strive to provide students with a well-organized, structured learning experience. Thus, each of my lectures begins by explicitly setting the objectives of the lecture. Each topic begins with an explicit description of how the lecture content compliments or enhances the textbook content. Each assignment comes with an explicit statement about how the activity will facilitate the students' skill development and learning. I also give direction regarding how and what to study for exams, with the hope that after stripping away any ambiguity regarding what to learn, students will get more immediately down to the business of learning. My goal is to remove any barriers between the student and direct exploration of the core material of the course, whether these barriers involve anxiety about what is required for success, or confusion over what should be considered core points versus elaborating details.

Complexity

Clear messages need not be limited to simple concepts. The skeleton of each of my lectures follows a progression from (a) *what do we know?* to (b) *how do we know this?*, then (c) *how can this knowledge be applied?*, and (d) *where can I learn more?* Teaching critical thinking skills requires modeling these thinking skills in the lecture hall, and it would be a disservice to leave students only with the status quo. Thus, I model the academic practice of refining concepts through criticism by expressing the current state of knowledge, but then giving voice to emerging counter-perspectives. As the second half of any lecture rolls around, critical appraisals are introduced, such as "What data contradict these statements?", "In

what ways did this theory fail to hold up when put into practice?”, or “What elements are missing here?”

I have high aims for my students, and wish for them to depart the course with real expertise in the subject, having embraced the unresolved ambiguities of the discipline rather than just gaining a passing familiarity with its main conclusions. However, a sophisticated level of discussion needs to warm up slowly within each topic, and over the course as a whole. Thus, I build in low-stakes evaluations early in the course to acclimatize them to critical thinking and my approach to evaluation. Depending on the course, this involves online quizzes, practice essay questions, or self-critiqued writing exercises. For final exams, my favorite written questions ask students to pull in two pieces of familiar information and integrate them in a new way. Ultimately, I aim to guide my students to high-level thinking by walking them carefully through each intermediate step.

Accessibility (which invites Ownership)

Because teaching is communication, it is a social enterprise, requiring some form of interpersonal contact. I strive to make all course elements highly accessible to students, so the learning environment will be available to them however they wish to interact with it. I record my lectures and provide movie files online as a safety net for students who have missed class, or for extra review. I keep lines of communication open by encouraging weekly feedback in an anonymous course survey, allowing students to have a place to express honest thoughts about their learning process. When problems or challenges arise, I aim for flexibility, to keep learning opportunities accessible in the face of problematic circumstances. When students know they will have multiple opportunities to learn, at their own pace, and at a time that suits them, the focus is shifted from simply meeting the course requirements, to pursuing learning for its own sake. This conveys a sense of ownership, responsibility, and freedom to choose their own learning process.

Integration

As a life-long student and participant in the study of Psychology, it's easy to see the important themes of the discipline everywhere. Starting a topic by making reference to its key themes in the news or popular culture not only engages students, but gets them used to actively applying a new way of understanding to the world around them. For example, there is a fantastic demonstration of *classical conditioning* in an episode of NBC's *The Office*. A short clip from *South Park* nicely introduces how defining *mental illness* can be complex and ambiguous. Side-by-side comparisons of contestants on CBC's *Dragon's Den* allow a discussion about what makes an effective versus ineffective research-based argument.

Creating an inclusive, widely applicable understanding of Psychology begins by evoking the “real world” in the lecture hall, and asking students to then take the content out into the world with them. I design assignments to specifically facilitate the application of

knowledge to students' own lives or environments. The typical format of each written assignment in an undergraduate survey course requires the students to summarize course content in the first half of the paper, and apply it to something they know well in the second half. Also, I conclude most lectures with a recommendation of a non-academic book that relates to the lecture's content, to make it clear that learning can and should continue beyond the few hours on campus. Sometimes these books are an example of how to apply the knowledge, other times the books offer a critical alternate perspective, and sometimes the books extend the knowledge in a new direction. Good mentorship has a long-term impact when students are propelled to continue their personal exploration, wanting to know more. Students may not remember all the details from my courses, but I aim to build in ways that the course content directly impacts how they understand their lives, or at least impacts what book they may read next summer. This keeps the course conversation going long after the lectures have ended.

Putting The Principles Together: Less is More

Since I want the learning experience to represent an initiation into the subculture of the discipline more than a simple unloading of all the cumulative conclusions within the field, I avoid getting trapped beneath too much content. Rather, my goal is to leisurely immerse students in the language and concerns of Psychology rather than race through as many concepts as possible. Guided by *clarity* and *complexity*, I aim to have one or two strong take-away messages that are more impactful, memorable, and developed compared to attempting to tackle six less-developed messages in a single lecture.

Although students have sometimes voiced concerns that not all textbook topics are covered adequately in class, this is a sacrifice in pursuit of a learning environment focused as much on the *processes* of the discipline as the *content*. Since these processes, not concepts, are the core learning goals of my courses, I aim for each lecture to take a different shape, depending on its message. I strive to develop a direct and clear path between what is done during course time and the main take-away messages, letting the subject of the lecture dictate its form, in choice of structure, activities, and detail.

Reference

Titworth, B. S., & Kiewra, K. A. (2004). Spoken organizational cues and student notetaking as facilitators of student learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 29*, 447-461. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2003.12.001