

*Conceptualization of Learning:*

A major challenge for teachers today is understanding how learning occurs in the classroom. A substantial proportion of my course preparation time is devoted to considering how students with different learning styles and abilities may learn the material presented to them. This can be a daunting task given that not all students learn through the same means or at the same pace. Thus, it is important to apply what I have learned from my studies in psychology and education, as well as my personal experience being a student, about the various routes to knowledge. For example, these methods may take the form of presenting analogies or metaphors when possible where concepts can be made much clearer when put in the context of a familiar domain in which students can draw links or connections to the unfamiliar concept. I have become quite adept at using animations in Powerpoint in order to accurately recreate the experimental conditions that preceded a theory which gives the students a direct observation of the phenomenon, allowing for a deeper understanding of the underlying theory being highlighted.

In sum, rather than attempting to teach every student individually, which would be impossible given time constraints, I create a learning environment in which a wide range of materials are utilized in order to accommodate different learning styles. This includes, but is not limited to, hands on demonstrations of conceptually dense phenomena, pushing the limits of technology to present material in an innovative way, being receptive to the audience and always adapting to what works best, and maintaining a non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable asking questions when the material is unclear.

*Conceptualization of Teaching:*

An outside observer may conceptualize teaching as the dissemination of a set of facts, beliefs, and theories to groups of individuals by direct lecture, experimentation, or discussion. However, anyone who has first-hand teaching experience knows that it requires a substantial amount of effort and responsibility. Perhaps the most important aspect of teaching is clear and effective communication. This begins on the first day with the presentation of the expectations of the course, and continues throughout the remainder of the semester.

Hand in hand with clear communication comes availability. I always make myself available to students for help on difficult concepts, or simply to proofread material before it is handed in. This requires a commitment beyond time spent in class and office hours. I make a concerted effort to respond to students' emails quickly, and I regularly make myself available outside of class time.

The next important aspect of teaching is through evaluation. Communicating clear feedback to students is a prerequisite of effective teaching. Larger classes often only allow scores on multiple choice exams, but in smaller classes, giving the appropriate level of feedback is imperative. That is, giving too little feedback does not help the student to learn and improve, and providing too much feedback may discourage students or dissuade them from providing their own unique perspective. It is important to identify early on students who may struggle or require assistance outside of class, as well as above-average students who may need to be challenged. Thus, using feedback as a means of effectively tailoring instruction to students is an integral part of teaching.

What it means to be a *great* teacher, in my opinion, is being prepared before class begins, having a firm understanding of the lecture material, presenting multiple perspectives of theories, utilizing a multitude of materials and instructional methods to keep students engaged, being responsive to students' needs and the dynamics of the course, stimulating students' curiosity in

the subject matter, fostering students' understanding and maturity as they prepare for the next step in their education or career, and providing the appropriate amount of feedback to assist students' critical thinking, reasoning, and writing.

#### *Goals for Students:*

Clearly communicating what is expected of the students in a course is a top priority. This is true both on the micro and the macro level. Visibly defined goals regarding assignments, due dates, readings, and progress checks are essential in order for a class to thrive. Likewise, each lecture or course session must be clearly organized. Lectures should follow a linear format and remain organized, covering topics that typically converge. A general progression should be followed, connecting lectures that comprise one big picture or integrated story. Classroom exercises should have practical value and this value should be clearly conveyed to the student. Class time should always be spent productively, and effort should be made to keep students engaged. In my writing seminars (PSYCH 392), I always attempted to create a dynamic environment, typically covering multiple topics. A sample lecture would include the discussion of a relevant reading, followed by a written response or opinion, and finished with a writing exercise. In my other courses, I often set aside time part-way through a class period to ensure that information was being understood through reflective writing exercises or quick on-the-spot reviews.

#### *Mentoring Students Outside of the Classroom*

Another important aspect of teaching in higher education is to be able to relate to students outside of the classroom. This includes being familiar with issues and experiences that can be obtained beyond being a high quality, active learner. The most important aspect of higher education is to get students involved in research. Research leads to innovation and drives progress in the field of experimental psychology and it is important to be able to bestow practical knowledge about the research process to motivated undergraduates. I have found it important to incorporate students in every aspect of my research from developing the experimental rationale/methods, to running subjects to analyzing and reporting results. It is always my goal with research assistants to encourage new thought, as well as independent projects that may lead to scholarly research. Properly scaffolding to a level where students can learn the necessary fundamentals that lead to tightly controlled research is a major part of the student/mentor relationship. I have completed research in a variety of domains which has motivated undergraduates to consistently work in my lab. My research is motivated by strong theoretical questions that have clear practical implications that I feel are very attractive to a diverse range of undergraduates.

#### *Exceeding Expectations as a Teacher:*

As I stated previously, the role of a teacher is not simply to read notes and advance slides. I put my best effort forward, semester after semester to build upon what I have learned as a student and as a teacher in order to improve upon my teaching skills. Part of these expectations comes with effort outside of the classroom. My role as a teacher does not stop when class ends. That is, a student must be assured that when they require extra help, the teacher will be there to provide it. For my cognition course (PSYCH 218) and introductory course (PSYCH 111), I felt it was very important to consistently review material to keep it fresh in the students' minds as well as holding outside of class review sessions before exams. Along those same lines, it is important to inform them of the best possible strategies for success, citing empirical research when possible to support my claims. Thus, mini-reviews are often conducted, lecture notes are made available, and outside of class review sessions are regularly offered.

At this point I have taught the junior writing seminar (PSYCH 392) on five separate occasions, introductory psychology (PSYCH 100) three times, research methods (PSYCH 192 and PSYCH 241) three times, and statistics in psychology (PSYCH 241). I feel it is an obligation as an effective teacher to always take steps to improve my teaching abilities and techniques. It is not acceptable to simply take a 'carbon copy' of a course and apply it to future semesters. This includes keeping up to date with the latest research and theories, improving materials to make them more comprehensible to the student, and being responsive to students' critiques and evaluations from previous semesters. At Smith College, I noticed a large improvement in almost every category across the two semesters, which I interpret as a reflection of my ability to improve the course.

As a whole, I have gained experience teaching in a number of different environments. I jumped at every opportunity to deliver guest lectures. Thus, I have lectured to classes as large as 500, and as small as seven. I have learned to adapt my teaching style to accommodate the demands of the classroom environment. For larger classrooms, it is important to include examples and demos that can be understood with minimal discussion. In smaller environments, it is more important to engage students in discourse about the topic. I have also gained experience teaching online where the primary objective is to promote discussions between students in order to get a sense of 'community.' Online instruction has its advantages in that I believe students are more confident contributing to the content after having time to comprehend it. When the curriculum permits, I try to incorporate some level of online involvement in the traditional courses to encourage students to remain involved in the material outside of class. Taking steps like these to constantly improve my teaching will yield additional success in the classroom.

Paving the way for students' success in the classroom should provide a positive example for students to learn by, instilling solid learning habits and skills. When I lecture, I am always enthusiastic, creating an abundance of energy in the room in an attempt to encourage student participation. I strive to present material that is interesting to students above and beyond what they need to know to pass an exam. I hope to inspire students to want to investigate the subject matter beyond the scope of the course. Teaching is a skill that can always be improved upon and I know I possess all the necessary qualities to continue to be an effective facilitator of knowledge.