Teaching Philosophy

Most students find psychology, especially social psychology, to be intrinsically interesting. Thus, my job as a teacher is to encourage that enthusiasm while developing my students’ expertise in critically analyzing scientific findings. I view my position as a teacher as a way to show my students that science offers more productive ways of answering the questions that they ask themselves, that psychology in particular offers tools and methods that can allow us to better understand human beings and ourselves, and that part of being a citizen is to be skeptical not only of the pronouncements of authority figures but of the explanations that they themselves believe.

I believe that developing my students’ ability to skeptically evaluate ideas is an essential outcome in teaching. Whether or not my students continue to use APA style or become experimental psychologists, citizens regularly encounter media simplifications of complicated scientific findings. Scientific knowledge and skepticism are critical tools in applying these findings (e.g., if correlation ≠ causation, then does napping during the workday cause increased cardiovascular health, or do those whose workplaces allow the flexibility to nap and/or whose personalities are sufficiently placid and circumstances sufficiently low-stress to nap differ from the general population?). As consumers, my students will face important decisions that can be guided by these scientific findings, such as those concerning their health, education, and lifestyle. Thus, I work to develop my students’ critical thinking skills by periodically asking students to critique media write-ups of scientific research.

Along with developing my students’ ability to critically examine research findings, I believe that being enthusiastic about course content myself is an important part of engaging my students’ interest. To remind students of how psychological research is relevant to the real world, I like to begin each class with an example that illustrates the day’s topic, often from a comic strip, news headline, or advertisement. Social psychology is rich in research that is relevant to my students’ lives. Thus, I use interesting research findings to introduce topics in research methodology and statistical analysis and to encourage students to persevere in the face of difficulty. For example, before introducing a complicated topic, I will mention that research indicates that seeing intelligence as malleable rather than innate and fixed (and thus interpreting challenges as an opportunity for intellectual growth) can lead to higher grades.

More generally, I strive to highlight for my students the connections between course content and the “big picture”, whether that means drawing connections between research findings and the real world or showing how individual assignments are relevant to the course’s semester goals. This may mean explaining how their reaction papers prepare them to participate in the week’s discussion or how particular homework assignments are a low-pressure chance to practice, with feedback, the analytic and writing skills they must demonstrate in their final papers. Where relevant, I also end lab sections with a brief summary of the skills they should be comfortable practicing. This helps students identify their own weak areas and also encourages those who were too shy to ask questions in front of their classmates to ask questions afterwards.

Finally, to improve my students’ writing and analytic skills, I balance my high standards with encouraging support to help students reach them. Particularly in research methodology and writing-intensive courses, I use my feedback on written assignments to emphasize the improvements in research skills and writing that I see. When returning graded papers, I discuss common problems on the paper and recommend strategies to improve, and I emphasize the importance of incorporating my comments on earlier assignments into future ones. Because students sometimes recognize an incomplete understanding of assignment requirements only after they attempt an assignment, I believe it is important for me to be readily available to answer their questions and explain difficult topics. Thus, I make myself available to students, both through email and in meetings outside of office hours. In these ways, I encourage my students to improve in each assignment.
In short, I strive to develop my students’ expertise in conducting scientific research while preparing to be skeptical and informed consumers of others’ interpretations of scientific results. In doing so, I strive to familiarize them with interesting findings that are relevant to their own life, and introduce them to how scientific reasoning can deepen their understanding of themselves and of other human beings.