

### **Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

#### **Goals:**

My major goal in teaching is to make Psychology come alive for students. I believe that the best foundation for learning is laid when students make connections between their own life experiences and major theories and concepts in psychology. I strive to help them build these bridges. Once the relevance of a topic is acknowledged, real-life experiences provide the "hook" that draws students in and makes them want to discover more.

#### **General Learning Environment:**

I teach in a variety of classroom settings including large Introductory Psychology classes of 80 students; a small learning community class of 28 students, upper level undergraduate classes about the neural bases of brain and behavior, and Ph.D. student seminars in Physiological Psychology and Cognitive Psychology. In all of these classes, I have a common philosophy: to create an environment in which students are optimally empowered to learn. I put a lot of energy into generating an atmosphere where students feel invested in the class. I care passionately about our students and I want them to succeed. Consequently, I feel that it is my responsibility to make learning possible for every student. I try to create classes that are challenging but well organized so that students know what is expected of them. My aim is to promote an active learning setting. I attempt to create an informal atmosphere in which students feel comfortable asking questions. I learn the students' names as quickly as possible (even in large 80 student lecture classes) and make it clear that will work together as a team to better understand psychology. To this end, I ask lots of questions throughout the class. Mostly, I ask questions that relate to the "big picture", these are fairly basic and do not require extensive background reading or prior knowledge, but are based on broader general experiences. Then I give some information about the topic and we revisit how this relates to the ideas they originally generated. As a cognitive neuroscientist with interests in learning and memory, I try to apply what I know to facilitate learning in my students. To this end, I also ask questions about materials that we have already covered that have relevance to the current topic. This helps to consolidate and emphasize the importance of certain principles while encouraging students to participate in the discussion. Furthermore, when students articulate what they are thinking, it provides another way to organize information, this in turn helps long-term memory retention. Once the expectation of an interactive environment is set, students feel more involved and invested in the class. An interactive class sets up a dynamic learning environment, which encourages students to ask more questions. This is stimulating for everyone, including myself. Class discussions never go in the same direction twice and are often great starting points for new research and teaching ideas. I relish the new perspectives that my students give me.

#### **Nuts and Bolts of Teaching:**

I use Powerpoint presentations for many classes and spend a lot of time researching and updating the basic topics, using a variety of textbooks and primary sources. Text slides bullet important points and wherever possible I use images, movie clips, videos and examples to illustrate the topics that I am teaching. I use many interactive demonstrations in which the students participate together as a large group of subjects. These are often very effective in demonstrating experimental design while helping students to make connections between their own behaviors and theories that we are covering in class. For more complex topics, for example, when teaching about the nervous system, I try to use easy to understand everyday analogies. My students seem to appreciate my sense of humor in my use of analogies, such as explaining that nerve cells work along the same lines as flushing a toilet. I constantly ask students about their opinions and behaviors in order for them to see connections with the materials we are covering in Psychology. I also liberally use anecdotes from my own life. Tales about growing up in England, my husband and my two teenage sons provide rich material.

I post my slides on Blackboard prior to the class and encourage students to annotate them with supplemental notes during class. This technique allows them to attend more fully during class since they are listening, thinking and discussing rather than having to write everything down. Again, this opens the door for more active learning. I use Blackboard for posting readings, information, assignments and announcements and frequently use online quizzes and lab demonstrations for homework assignments. Due to recent "technical difficulties" I also email students with duplicate information.

In addition to interactive lecture-based classes I also use a number of activities that are primarily student-led. These include small-group student presentations of primary source materials. Individual students are often required to present final papers to the entire class in a mini-conference format. Also, I run small group workshops (where a larger class is divided into small groups to discuss a series of problems, their answers are later shared with the whole class). Small group workshop activities take advantage of peer-led learning which has been shown to be effective in promoting deeper learning. Students often assume leadership roles in facilitating discussion and helping the group to come to a consensus. In these forums, weaker students benefit from hearing the explanations offered by the stronger students. The stronger students benefit from the opportunity to explore the materials from a variety of perspectives.

#### **Teaching Individuals:**

I enjoy the challenge of teaching tremendously. Every class has students with individual learning styles and some find the material more challenging than others. As a teacher I try to make learning possible for every student. I make a point of being very approachable both inside and outside of class. I follow up with students who miss class, do poorly on assignments, or fail to hand in homework and I have been successful in motivating these students once they realize that I want them to pass the course as much as they do. I am relatively adaptable; in my seminar classes I change readings to suit the interests and backgrounds of the group. I solicit feedback about my teaching through the semester to try and discover ways in which students might learn better. Feedback from one informal survey has led me to provide "review guides" at the end of each class highlighting the information that is most important to retain. In helping students to learn it is also important to help them to think metacognitively, about how they learn best, and to help them strategize about time management for assignments and studying for tests.

#### **Assessing student learning:**

In assessing student learning, I like to customize for individual groups and subject areas. I feel that it is important to maintain high standards to ensure that when students do well it is because they have worked hard and have made a significant achievement. I encourage every student to reach his or her full potential. In making sure that every student has the opportunity to learn I also feel that it is important to assess learning in a variety of ways. My classes always have a participation grade that helps to promote student attendance and attention. I also have regular assignments through the semester that encourage distributed rather than mass studying, which is known to promote long-term retention of materials. For tests, I emphasize multiple-choice questions, which examine recognition rather than recall memory, since I feel that it levels the playing field more for students of different ages and backgrounds. I always assign at least one substantial paper that requires library research and I try to make paper writing topical and centered around individual students interests. Other forms of assessment include presentations and group discussion projects. One of the elements that I particularly enjoy about teaching is that enthusiasm seems to be contagious. I am enthusiastic about my classes and my students respond to me in kind. It is very satisfying when students bring in or email current news items or primary sources about topics they find interesting. There is no grade or credit associated with this activity but may be one of the more important markers of how students extend what they have learned in the classroom to new ideas.

#### **Sources of Inspiration:**

My students are often my sources of inspiration for pedagogical innovation. I am also fortunate to be involved in two projects that focus on improving student learning. Firstly, I am collaborating with Dr. Karen Phillips, an Organic Chemist at Hunter College in assessing the efficacy of a workshop program of teaching Organic Chemistry. Dr. Phillips is a dynamic and extraordinarily gifted and dedicated teacher and I have gleaned a lot of information about active learning environments and peer-led learning exercises. Secondly, I am engaged in learning community teaching at John Jay where one of my Introductory Psychology classes is paired with English 101. I have adapted the syllabus so that examples in literature can also be applied to basic theories and concepts in Psychology. Involvement in the learning community has exposed me to faculty from a wide variety of disciplines and I have benefited greatly from exchange of ideas relating to pedagogy.