

“Science, like life, feeds on its own decay. New facts burst old rules; then newly divined conceptions bind old and new together into a reconciling law.”

- William James

There is nobody better to quote than the father of psychology himself, William James, when reflecting on my philosophy of teaching. The field of psychology and neuroscience is rich with history, and new discoveries about human behavior and the brain are endless. As a graduate student doing work at the intersection of psychology, neuroscience, and law, I have experienced the difficulties students face when transitioning from memorizing facts about the brain to applying the information in relevant contexts. As an aspiring researcher and educator, my goal is to enable students to become critical thinkers who can comfortably integrate knowledge across disciplines and into their own lives.

As a researcher, I am used to the fast paced and evolving nature of the field. I strive to understand and incorporate the current trends in science to enhance my own productivity and understanding. Budding students, regardless of whether or not they enter into science, must think critically about their interests and be able to relate their knowledge across disciplines and to a lay audience. As technology enables people to communicate across the globe, disseminating information to the public as well as to others who may benefit from your expertise, becomes increasingly important. Motivating students to think about how their own interests fit into a bigger picture allows them to begin thinking outside of the box, searching for possibilities that have never been discovered before.

I have done this in my teaching with success. I was awarded the Bass Instructor of Record Fellowship that allowed me to teach my own course advanced level seminar titled the Psychology of Justice. While students did have a reading list that included the most fundamental work done in this area, I encouraged students to choose their own path by following up on the work which they found most interesting. For instance, students would have to choose a recently published, empirical, peer-reviewed study to summarize to the class that cited the classical work we read in class. Or students would use the concepts they learned about to find relevant media articles that used, applied, or were examples of what they just learned about. Those activities empower students to think critically about how these basic psychological concepts are found all around them. Furthermore, students were excited to engage in class discussions, summarizing the work they found and connections they made on their own.

The semester culminated with students writing a literature review on the topic of their choice. They also made a short presentation and were prepared to engage the class for a short discussions. Some of the paper topics included how one’s sense of justice influences cyberbullying, youth perceptions of the criminal justice system, and the role of restorative justice programs on recidivism rates.

I have found that when students have a mix of independent and collaborative thinking activities

and class discussions and debates, the use of technology allows them to go above and beyond the normal breadth of materials. I encouraged this in my seminar by hosting a website for the class so that they could respond to homework assignments via forum posts. But another successful strategy for opening the minds of my students is for me to be hands on and approachable. Students can explore their own trajectories of thought, boosting their self-confidence and self-generated interest in a topic. As a teacher, I share with my students the principles that guide my own insight and success. Rather than think of me as someone who is giving out grades at the end of the semester, I want students to view me as someone they can talk to about their own interests. Successful students are those that are actively engaged and interested in going above and beyond traditional classroom activities. Some students in my course ended up asking me for recommendation letters for summer internships and post-Bachelor opportunities that were inspired by the material from my course.

I hardly touched upon how students need to gain a core understanding of a topic, the importance of 'critical-thinking,' or how as a teacher I need to gain respect from my students. These are all processes that are essential for a good teacher to possess, but not necessarily for a good teacher to dwell upon. As society evolves, teaching standards should become more nuanced to help students create a visionary path for themselves. As I continue forward my own teaching techniques may change over time, but the goals I have set for myself are ones that I wish to instill in others, creating students who are more than automatons, but creative bundles of intelligence that can successfully place themselves wherever they are willing to go.