

PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAMS



Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

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Teaching is an integral part of my identity as a psychologist and a valued aspect of who I am. I cannot claim credit for the foundations of my work with students, however, because all psychologists are spoiled by the centrality of learning within our discipline. For those reading this from the perspective of another field, please bear with this part of the essay. From my experiences as a reviewer on this campus and for the UM System's Comprehensive Program Assessments (CPA) process, I know that other disciplines are as committed and as knowledgeable about instructional methods. It is simply that I am grateful for the contributions of psychology to our understanding of education, and remain happy in my choice of discipline and my life in academia.

It is difficult to find many phenomena more firmly entrenched within the field of psychology than learning and motivation. The early experimental methodologies within psychology were aimed at helping us understand the processes of, and influences on, learning. Some of the major battles fought between learning theorists have been focused on the relative importance of external versus internal factors in shaping what and how we learn. This dialectic of external and internal motivations and processes also frames how I teach. In this essay, I attempt to describe the ways in which learning theory, and especially Bandura's social cognitive theory, guides my work.

The teaching strategies that I employ reflect principles of operant conditioning and use reinforcement to shape both learning and the development of study skills. The extensive research literature in operant conditioning also helps organize my teaching efforts differently for different students. Learning is intrinsically rewarding for our most talented students, so high achieving students need fewer objective external rewards. These students are quite focused on grades for major exams and papers as they work towards that all-important course grade and eventual degree, but these same students are irritated by what they perceive to be "busy work" and do not need many incentives to participate. They generally have a well-developed system of self-reinforcement and know how to encourage themselves (via both external rewards and self-talk) to engage in the daily activities that are part of the learning process. For these academically gifted students, an over-emphasis on external reinforcers decreases the level of internal pleasure experienced in the process of learning (a well-documented phenomenon in the research literature). Thus, in my research advising of undergraduates, my graduate level courses, and mentoring of other faculty, I have to consider when to offer external incentives and when to simply provide interesting material and verbal encouragement - and then stay out of the way. I also have to challenge the academically gifted students in my Psych 2280 Psychology of Death & Dying course through the provision of optional "stretch yourself" experiences and acknowledgment of their hard work and productivity.

Much of my focus with undergraduates, on the other hand, involves attention to those students who have not yet developed effective study skills. College-level work is an effort for these individuals, and is oftentimes experienced as at odds with the many demands of employment and family responsibilities. For these students, learning theory helps me understand that distal reinforcers such as course grades are not sufficiently motivating to influence their daily or even weekly efforts in reading the textbook or preparing an assignment. Many students need stronger proximal reinforcers to increase their time on task. Examples of these in my Psych 2280 course include participation credit for non-graded quizzes, points earned for worksheets as well as final assignments, and personally addressed feedback along with multiple short writing assignments. Academically struggling students have not yet developed internalized skills in pacing their exposure to course material, so my online Psych2280 course is carefully designed to organize material in weekly units. Twice a week, students are emailed reminders of where I expect them to be in their reading of the textbook and online learning activities. I have just revised this as an eight week mid-semester course to help with student retention efforts (e.g., students who drop a course in the second week of the semester may still need another course to retain student loans and stay enrolled). In this version, exams have been replaced with weekly quizzes that cover 2 chapters each and with the opportunity to miss one. The course continues to demand significant time and effort from students, but hopefully also helps them stay on track.

Psychological research demonstrates that more than knowledge and skills are needed for students to be effective in academic and work settings; students must also have the confidence to apply their skills in specific situations. Instructional methods, however, are not equal in their impact on how students view and use their own academic abilities. Thus, my teaching efforts are grounded in Bandura's self-efficacy theory and the ever expanding literature on the pivotal role of self-efficacy in education. A major contribution of this theory is the reminder that skill acquisition is not sufficient to ensure that students will apply their knowledge and abilities when called for either in the classroom or in daily life. Two students with the identical aptitude for learning may persevere in varying amounts when they encounter challenging assignments. Two students with the same understanding of course material may perform quite differently on exams because of differences in confidence. I intentionally select teaching strategies to maximize both acquisition of knowledge and confidence to use that knowledge. Guided experiences of personal mastery have been empirically demonstrated to be the most effective ways of increasing self-efficacy. That means that most students need a series of learning experiences that move from lower to higher levels of challenge with enough instructional support to succeed. In my online Psych 2280 course, students must complete several very simple tasks to become familiar with discussion groups and the technology we use throughout the course. This prepares them for graded assignments later on that require use

of these skills. In this course, students first learn about advanced directives and durable power of attorney for healthcare. They are assigned to help a family member complete a specific advanced directive form and then have to write about this experience in their discussion group of 8 students. These are meaningful opportunities for rehearsal of course content but also place each student in the role of “expert” within their family and their student group. Both parts of the assignment are intended to increase student confidence in their ability to apply course knowledge in a practically important way. For the same reasons, students in my doctoral level courses and clinical supervision groups rotate in the role of discussion leader. By the end of the semester, I aim for each of them to develop skills in facilitating discussions of the assigned readings and clinical cases, and to also view themselves as a future faculty member or clinical supervisor. These dual goals shift the focus away from my own facilitation and towards guiding development of these skills.

After guided experiences of personal mastery, Bandura’s research demonstrates that observational learning of similar others is next in line for shaping self-efficacy perceptions. Students benefit from opportunities to see other students struggling with class assignments and clinical material and then succeeding. In my online undergraduate course, students read the short essays of their peers and are then responsible for completing a written peer review. They seem to benefit from this more than the feedback that they receive from me. In the doctoral clinical psychology courses, students are most engaged when the discussion is facilitated by a peer. This is also true of how faculty members learn from each other in our departmental discussions of teaching.

It is not due to coincidence (or laziness) that I have stopped giving formal lectures in any of my courses. Traditional lectures have an honored place in the history of academia and remain valuable in some areas. When lectures are based on original material that would make an excellent new textbook or course supplement (if only that faculty member had the time to write!), then we all should applaud. In my topic areas, however, quality textbooks are available without a need for me to re-create or re-organize this content. Rather than present myself as an expert, I prefer students to be more focused on their direct interactions with the course material and with each other. We typically become aware of stair steps only when they are broken or blocked and we stumble. In the same way, it is quite likely that students are most aware of my role when I’ve done something that impedes their learning. That is why feedback from students, however painful at times, is so important in signaling that it is time for the next course revision. I do what I can to benefit from the many campus instructional resources (including the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Faculty Resource Center, and colleagues within my department and from across campus). I am grateful for these many avenues of support as I continue to develop instructional skills and gain the confidence needed to move forward when I stumble. And, I try to share what I’ve learned with my colleagues in psychology, who are an ongoing source of new learning for me.