

Statement of Teaching Philosophy: Amy Trahan

In each class I teach, I emphasize the relevance and usefulness of the course material for understanding real world situations. For example, I always begin the semester by reading scientific news headlines and asking students how these findings would suggest they alter their lifestyles. Students typically suggest radical changes, such as revamping their diet to prevent cancer. By the end of the semester, students respond to this same exercise by asking for more details of the research design; they can now evaluate the merit of the findings themselves and suggest more moderated responses to them.

My goal is that students come to see the course concepts as part of a toolkit for navigating the world, so that learning extends beyond the classroom and the semester. This tactic helps students to learn the material more thoroughly and better use it analytically. By stressing applications of ideas, I encourage my students to take risks in their approaches to assignments and discussion. By the end of the semester, my students are interested in and excited by psychology, and have a sense of how psychology can be useful to them. By encouraging my students to explore how class material applies to their own lives, I make my students partners in crafting their learning experience toward their personal interests and goals.

When I teach my research methods course, most of the students begin the semester believing that it will be one of the most boring courses they take. Yet, as the semester-end evaluations show, they come to appreciate how an understanding of psychological methods is a powerful tool for navigating scientific claims of all kinds. On the first day of class, I tell my students that they will be developing a "bull detector" that will allow them to assess the validity of scientific claims. Throughout the semester, we use research articles from all areas of psychology, as well as other fields, and have students explain how a consideration of methods dilutes or reinforces the findings. For example, students learn that studies with larger sample sizes more easily achieve significant results but may not have meaningful effect sizes; they should interpret results from these studies cautiously. By the end of the semester, students are able to make intelligent and thoughtful critiques of research findings and determine the extent to which the findings might be useful to them.

At the same time, I emphasize that science is performed in the real world and is therefore subject to constraints. There is no perfect research project; every finding is open to intelligent and valid criticism. Emphasizing this point increases students' comfort with taking a critical stance toward the research of advanced or renowned scientists, but it also increases their comfort with taking risks themselves. Once they understand that even excellent research is rife with flaws, students feel less vulnerable when their own work is flawed. Ideally, students can anticipate and explain the flaws in their own work because they have deliberately made trade-offs to strengthen other aspects of the project.

Additionally, when students approach course material as a set of tools rather than as absolute knowledge, I find they retain and understand the material better. For example, in my Organizational Psychology courses, students complete a semester-long project analyzing an organization in terms of course materials. Students who approach the project with a "materials as tools" stance tend to do a much better job tying the course concepts to the organization they have studied than students who focus more on memorizing the textbook explanation of the concept. I have found when talking to former students that people who approached the project this way also remember their

own findings years later, and can still accurately explain the dynamics they observed in their focal organization.

Perhaps the most important consequence of presenting course materials as parts of a toolkit is that it engenders a collaborative learning spirit in the classroom, leading to greater interest and enthusiasm. Students volunteer their own problems and questions as fodder for discussion. They begin to see each other as resources as they realize how their classmates have approached the material via their own examples and issues. Students become more willing to take risks in their papers and their contributions to discussions, often by using interesting metaphors or unusual examples to explain course concepts. For example, one student recently illustrated how to construct a questionnaire to assess a socially undesirable behavior with the example of how some people blow their noses on their sleeves instead of tissues. Although the example was unorthodox, it was appropriate to the discussion, and the other students responded enthusiastically. I also reinforce risk taking by building rewards for creativity and originality into my grading rubrics whenever possible, and encouraging students to pursue research topics that interest them.

I continue to seek strategies to improve my teaching by innovating tactics to help students see psychology as useful and relevant, rather than fodder for testing and evaluation. Every semester, some students are hesitant to relinquish their focus on test-based performance. I am especially interested in reaching these students. In particular, I look forward to having total control over syllabi and assignments so that I can synergistically align the classroom toward applied learning.

I believe my students are empowered to continue the journey they began in my classroom once they leave. In fact, several of my former students have told me that they have become bolder scholars as a result of their time in my class. Whether they go on to design and implement their own research projects or simply evaluate scientific findings in the news more critically, my students learn to think thoughtfully about the world around them. Knowing that I have had a lasting impact on my students is one of my greatest rewards as a teacher.