

Teaching Philosophy

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Within and outside the classroom my teaching is shaped by a single goal: I try to help students understand the *process*—not just the content—of psychological science and clinical practice. Achieving this goal requires different strategies to reach students with different levels of experience and expertise, and to create an atmosphere wherein learning takes place within and outside the classroom.

Connecting With Students at Different Levels

I teach in the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral programs here at Adelphi. In undergraduate courses my central goal is to help students conceptualize complex problems and develop the skills necessary to wrestle with questions that have no easy, ready answer. I strive to reach students on an emotional as well as an intellectual level by deliberately presenting ideas and findings that contradict some of their longstanding assumptions. Whether the issue is psychiatric diagnosis, psychotropic medication, or the uses (and abuses) of intelligence tests, I have found that challenging students' strongly-held beliefs compels them to engage the material more deeply than they otherwise would.

Although these common threads run through every undergraduate class I teach, I also recognize that students at different levels are prepared to engage course material in different ways. For beginning students, a primary goal is to develop cohesive arguments and learn to defend their positions with logic and data rather than appeals to authority. As students enter mid-level classes they begin applying their critical thinking skills to real-world problems. At this level, my main focus is on helping students tolerate ambiguity and find ways to assess the strengths and weaknesses of competing perspectives. In upper-level seminars students are capable of generating their own original arguments and designing studies to test their ideas. Drawing upon material from earlier courses, we conceptualize psychological science as an ongoing effort to which the student may contribute.

Graduate teaching requires a different emphasis, as students apply their knowledge and skills in clinical and community settings. A more integrative approach is required—one that combines classroom learning with apprenticeship and collaboration. Significant challenges arise for many graduate students as they begin to construct their professional identity. These challenges are complicated by the fact that graduate students often take academic achievement as a given: They expect to master material with relative ease, and anticipate success in their academic endeavors. Not surprisingly, many of our best students have difficulty as they move from classroom to consulting room because their longstanding learning strategies may not lead to quick success as clinicians. Complementing intellectual prowess with experiential learning is a challenge for many of our students (and, ironically, may be a particular challenge for some of our brightest students).

Integrative Teaching and Lifelong Learning

Preparing students to be lifelong learners requires that we instill in them an openness to new ideas and alternative perspectives. Many students want to specialize as soon as possible, believing that to succeed in their chosen career they must narrow their focus exclusively to courses within their chosen

field. We, their mentors, do this too—the demands of academia pull us strongly in that direction. But I believe we've gone too far, and specialized too much. In seeking expertise we've lost context and breadth.

To be lifelong learners students and faculty alike must maintain our connections with neighboring disciplines. Because I am a clinical psychologist, it is important that I stay abreast of current work in other areas of psychology (developmental, social, cognitive, etc.). But it is equally important that I integrate into my teaching ideas and findings from other fields (e.g., neuroscience, computer science, sociology, social work, literature). Nesting research and practice within the broadest possible intellectual framework helps ensure that our students not only make sound scientific, clinical, and ethical decisions, but also become lifelong contributors to their discipline, and effective teachers and role models for the next generation of scholars.

Beyond the Classroom: Scholarship and Mentorship

Scholarship is a form of teaching as well—communicating ideas and insights in a clear and compelling way. For me effective scholarship invariably involves students. Right now there are 14 students working in my laboratory in Blodgett Hall: nine doctoral students, three masters students, and two undergraduates. Most of the research projects currently underway are student-generated; some are part of my research program examining the antecedents and consequences of dependent personality traits and the interpersonal dynamics of personality assessment. Students working in my lab are required to be involved in multiple research projects—those of their colleagues as well as their own—so that every research study is a collaborative endeavor, and an opportunity for peer-to-peer teaching. Many of these collaborative efforts result in convention presentations and publications, and some make their way back into the classroom as well. During the past three years I have co-authored five journal articles and book chapters with eight different Adelphi students. Our group has presented eleven student co-authored papers (involving ten different students) at professional meetings since 2006. One student-authored paper from a few years back (an undergraduate honors thesis that was eventually published; Ng & Bornstein, 2005) is required reading in two of my classes.

Mentorship is teaching, but a different kind of teaching. In contrast to traditional classroom work, where the focus tends to be on knowledge generated by others, mentorship involves guiding students as they make decisions—often very personal decisions—regarding their education, career, and long-term goals. Effective mentorship requires that we be authoritative without being authoritarian—confident in the advice we offer, but secure enough to allow students to make their own decisions and experience a sense of autonomy and ownership. Effective mentorship also involves being a role model, not only with respect to one's behavior, but with respect to one's attitude and outlook as well. I often tell my non-academic colleagues that I have the best job in the world: I'm actually paid to spend my time talking to really smart people about stuff I'm interested in anyway. If one genuinely loves one's work students can feel it. It shines through in every interaction. That probably has a more powerful positive impact than anything I could ever say or do.