

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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My approach to teaching has emerged through my experience as an instructor at the graduate level, as well as my scholarship in education and cognitive development. Using stories from my own experience, I will describe four principles that guide my teaching.

Formulating clear overarching learning goals. As a teacher, I'm continually asking myself, "What is it I *really* want students to come away with—if students latched onto only one idea from my course, what would I want it to be?" This reflection guides my teaching in multiple ways. First, it helps me in designing a course around a central theme. For example, at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, I taught a graduate seminar called Instruction and Development—a survey course of cognitive developmental theory and its application to education. The large scope of this course necessarily creates a problem of coherence; there is a risk that students' learning would be—in the words of an oft-repeated maxim in education—a mile wide and an inch deep.

Disciplined reflection on my learning goals for students helped me address the problem of coherence by identifying a core theme around which I would design the course. In the case of this course, it was the twofold idea that a) an understanding of students' thinking is a powerful resource for teaching, and a) conversely, research methodologies that incorporate a teaching component are powerful means of illuminating the development of students' thinking. This latter idea is less intuitive and less often appreciated: studies of cognitive development that include a teaching element are able to shed light on the inherently social nature of development, and to disambiguate robust developmental constraints in students' thinking from what is amenable to ambitious, carefully-tailored instruction. Often, such studies provide a corrective to long-held assumptions about what children of certain ages cannot do.

Having formulated an overarching learning goal for my seminar, I found myself spontaneously inspired in my planning and preparation. It guided me in selecting readings, writing online discussion questions, and planning short lectures. It also helped me in what I regard as one of the greatest challenges in teaching well—that is, orchestrating discussions that surface diverse ideas, and that position students as authors of their own learning, while at the same time guiding collective inquiry towards useful understandings of the material. In facilitating discussions, I continually found that the course theme helped me navigate this inherent tension, acting as a heuristic for identifying valuable opportunities to connect the conversation to this central idea.

Authentic participation in academic practices. My teaching is always guided by two kinds of goals. The first kind of goal I described above, which aims at course content. The second type of goal transcends the specific content—it aims to scaffold students' participation in common practices in academia. In my graduate seminar, I decided on writing a literature reviews as my "practice goal." For their final project, students would write a review of the literature on a topic of their choosing, provided that it falls within the broad areas of instruction and development. In setting this goal, I had to address multiple challenges. First, I had to make clear to students the importance of this practice and its role in scholarly inquiry, so that they would appreciate the broader significance of the skills they were learning. Second, I had to make certain that the assignment was reasonable for a semester-long course; a literature review of publishable length is certainly not appropriate. Third, I had to make sure that I provided sufficient scaffolding, given that students had likely never researched and written this type of paper before. As experienced writers and researchers, teachers may be inclined to take their skills for granted—a tendency to which we must remain vigilant.

To scaffold this course project, I created several smaller assignments. The overarching goal of these assignments was to support students in organizing their literature review around a central argument, rather than writing a disjointed summary of individual articles. For example, early in the semester, I asked students to write a draft of an introductory paragraph in which they completed several sentence stems. (“The purpose of this paper is to review the research on...”; “This topic is important because...”; “In this paper, I argue that the literature...”). I also assigned students to read several published literature reviews and to evaluate them according to a rubric I designed, to support them in identifying the attributes of a quality literature review.

I also aim to create opportunities to participate in multiple academic practices in the context of a single course. For instance, in this course, I assigned each student to write a review of two of their peers' first drafts. In doing so, they would be acting as reviewers for an imaginary journal. When students submitted their final draft, they would also submit a cover letter in which they elucidated how the revisions were attentive to the feedback they received. Writing both reviews and cover letters are important practices in the world of academic publishing.

Productive struggle with challenging questions through active engagement and discussion.

Important scholarly questions are hard—they resist easy answers and permit multiple perspectives. In a sense, my goal as a teacher is for students to, at the end of the semester, be able to identify these questions and explain in detail why the best answer is “It’s complicated.” Hence, an approach I often take us to problematize such questions, but in a way that is productive—promoting interest and inquiry rather than stifling it. Often, this means pointing to the social, cultural, or political background to extensively neutral “scientific” issues. For example, I realized that many of the students in my class were school psychologists in training, and that it would be productive to problematize an overly simplistic interpretation of IQ. I assigned readings that pointed to the inherently cultural nature of cognitive development, and showed that making seemingly superficial changes to items on cognitive tests could produce radically different performances—contrary to the expectation that, since the variant items seem to measure the same underlying cognitive capacities, participants’ performance should be unaffected.

Continual reflection and refinement. I aspire to adopt what has been called a “growth” mindset in regards to my teaching. That is, I strive for mastery as a teacher by embracing my failures. I view teaching as a never-ending process of creative problem-solving, always offering opportunities for improvement through cycles of assessment, reflection and adaptation. I believe effective teachers can be identified in the efforts they make to become even better.

Several weeks into the semester, I realized I was failing to facilitate discussions in which the students in my course addressed each other as much as they did me. While I think it's important for instructors to make substantive contributions to discussion, my intention was to dissolve the teacher-student hierarchy to an appreciable degree, especially considering that this was a graduate course, and to support students in building on each other’s ideas. To address this failure, I experimented with the format of a mock debate in which the class was divided into two opposing sides. For example, one debate centered on the question of whether a particular research methodology was “scientific.” I found that the debate format necessarily required that the two sides to address each other, and that students worked together excitedly to formulate their side's arguments and evidence. Rather than creating an adversarial atmosphere, as I was concerned it might, it generated a global sense of enjoyment in collectively engaging with interesting questions.