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Teaching Philosophy Statement

When I first began teaching, in my first semester as an undergraduate student in college, I had a single strength: my love for the content. Then, as a tutor and later as a teaching assistant, my enthusiasm for psychology and politics was clear to all on-lookers. Through those experiences, I have learned that genuine enthusiasm is a remarkable pedagogical tool. Students, who may have had minimal interest in the course topic coming in, are befuddled when they see their instructor so engaged in something that they had thought incapable of capturing anyone's interest. This period of befuddlement where the students are trying to make sense of my zeal for the material is a window of opportunity where I can introduce students to a world that they did not know existed. I use several techniques to guide students into the great world of psychology that lies before them.

Make it Real and Relevant

Students sometimes struggle to learn because a concept is too abstract and they cannot see it in the real world. Students also struggle in some cases where they simply do not want to believe what they are being told. For example, individualistic cultures imbue conformity and obedience to authority with a negative connotation. For this reason, many students will accept findings that other people in another generation would be willing to conform and obey an authority figure. However, I can dissuade them of this self-serving bias by telling them that they will be participating in study in class that day. I proceed to tell them to write random numbers on a sheet of paper; when they have covered the entire sheet in random numbers, I instruct them to crumple the paper and throw it onto the floor, and then fill another sheet of paper with random numbers. After several sheets, students start to realize that they have conformed to the demands of an authority figure. I sometimes show short video clips of famous experiments where unwitting volunteers obeyed an experimenter commanding them to shock another person. Demonstrations like this one helps students get over their initial resistance to believing that they are susceptible to a certain psychological phenomenon. After students have experienced the phenomenon, they understand it better and are better equipped to understand behavior in the world around them in light of that phenomenon. To cultivate this attention to psychology at work in the world, I use topics in the news media relevant to the topic at hand.

Dig Deeper

Once students grasp an idea, their teachers need to challenge them to dig deeper. Students should understand arguments that support or oppose a claim being made by scientists (or journalists reporting on science). To aid in this process, I often assign students to debate one another, where the students are randomly assigned to a side of an issue. After their arguments have been fleshed out, I re-assign them to the other side of the debate and push them to make sense of reasonable arguments with supportive data that may seem contradictory. Depending on the class, I sometimes ask students to write weekly blog entries where they summarize the positions of two theories that seem to be in conflict with one another. Both of these activities help students to engage the material directly, and to cultivate their ability to discuss high-level concepts through the spoken and written word.

Moving Forward

As a teacher of science, I am not satisfied if students are only thinking about what has been done in the past; rather, I encourage them to critique the work that they have learned about and try to develop new ideas that synthesize the old ones and may potentially move understanding forward. To do this, my students write half-page “essays” each week where they are to raise a critical question from the readings. These essays tend to point to theoretical gaps or contradictions in the past work. As the semester progresses and the students’ skillsets grow, they start to propose testable hypotheses that could reconcile conflicting ideas. At this point, students not only understand key concepts from psychology, but also how to think like a young psychological scientist and can think more critically about the world beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

Overall, my goal in teaching is to help students understand complicated ideas and to think in ways to advance scientific understanding. I believe that one of the best ways to get students to understand something is to get them excited about it and encourage them to pursue interesting questions. This critical thinking and intellectual exploration will help them think outside of the box and be innovators and leaders in whatever field they choose to pursue.