Winston-Salem State University
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Teaching Philosophy

At the core, my teaching philosophy is to always utilize the best and most effective teaching practices. Using the knowledge I gained while earning my Certificate of Distinction from the Center of Teaching and Learning (CETL), I have students that are excited and enthusiastic about psychology – even in classes such as research methods and statistics. With the best teaching practices in mind, my teaching strategy incorporates hands-on activities to foster active learning, a focus on student-centered learning by applying course content to students’ experience of the world, and mentoring students to prepare them for careers and graduate school. I keep these practices in mind to become a better teacher, research mentor, and advisor, as well as when assisting our department with curriculum development.

Hands-On Activities and Active Learning
Research on student-centered learning through hands-on activities is well-supported (see Michael, 2006). But at the beginning of my teaching experience, I knew nothing about active learning. As an advanced graduate student, I prepared a PowerPoint presentation for an Experimental Psychology course that included interesting illustrations, but I realized that it was not an approach that would keep this course on a path to reach my teaching goals. Flashing back to my own undergraduate experimental course, the primary lesson learned was that research was extremely boring and my only question was: Why would anyone spend their entire lives doing this? Clearly, a change of plan was needed to demonstrate the amazing discoveries possible from psychological research. After this “light bulb moment”, I noted the primary lessons needing to be covered and placed students in groups to form questions for a questionnaire to assess how funny people are. Students discussed and debated the questions on their “Funniness Inventory” and some questions were kept while others were not included because they did not adhere to the topics we discussed regarding validity (e.g., face validity). This activity reverberated throughout the semester because they later demonstrated a fundamental understanding of psychological research on short-answer and essay exams that cannot be achieved by rote memorization. Over the years, I have modified this activity to its full potential and witnessed its effectiveness here at Winston-Salem State University (WSSU). Using rubrics similar to our quantitative and critical thinking rubrics (for rubric effectiveness, see Hansen, 2012), students often score high on this assignment.

Social psychology is a course easily adapted to an active learning approach. My social psychology students are assigned to groups in which they violate social norms while examining conformity (e.g., standing backwards on an elevator), simulate the bystander effect (e.g., tripping and dropping books in a busy or secluded area), and witness conformity (e.g., forming lines and counting how many people get in line) on campus and write a lengthy report on the reactions of the passersby. By participating in these activities, students learn first-hand how prevalent these social psychological concepts are. Furthermore, my students gain a deeper understanding of these concepts by testing these topics out in the real-world, instead of merely reading words in the textbook or in a PowerPoint lecture.

Student-Centered Learning by Applying Course Content to Students’ Real World
Whenever possible, I apply my course content to real world situations and events, especially events that my students know and understand. One way that I apply content is through using
the narrative approach (telling brief stories to provide examples of content). After providing definitions for new terms or theories, I provide one brief example from my life that illustrates that term or theory. I always choose stories that students can easily relate to, often getting a show of hands of people who have similar personal stories. For example, I tell my students how my father punished me as a child with, as my students call it, “butt whoopings”. I explain to them how this is an ineffective way to stop negative behaviors and how it encourages negative behaviors, because children often model their behavior after their parents. That is, when parents hit children, children learn that hitting is a good behavior – a behavior to be modeled. This lesson is sometimes disconcerting for some students as most of my students admit to having their “butts whooped” during their childhood, which they perceived as normal. Students are inspired by my childhood which was less than perfect, as demonstrated by my student’s (Lisa Matthews) correspondence with me: “As always I think about you and your story, your childhood stories that you shared with us, and where you are now holding a PhD. Coupled with seeing you standing there lecturing, every other day, is yet another motivator for me.”

In my experience and based on several research findings (e.g., Hooks, 2014), this teaching strategy not only helps me relate to the students, but also provides meaning to newly learned material and illustrates the new term or theory in a way that enhances the definition, while also building a relationship between teacher and student. By using this approach, my students easily provide several illustrative examples from their own lives that facilitate an interesting and productive discussion in the classroom. Students are connecting prior knowledge to new knowledge which facilitates learning (Pressley, Wood, Woloshyn, Martin, King, & Menke, 1992). Instead of testing for the rote memorizations of definitions, my exams often use the narratives provided by me or the students to assess their understanding of the terms and theories.

In another example of applying course material to the real world, when teaching about social norms, I play the “Urinal Game” with my social psychology students. Although this is an online demonstration in the form of a cartoon, everyone can understand how this demonstration mimics the real world. This game takes the students through a variety of men’s room scenarios in which some urinals are available while others are not. The students are instructed to vote on which urinal should be used, according to their understanding of social norms. Students are surprisingly passionate about what the “right” answer is and interestingly women often seem to be better at this game than the men. The “Urinal Game” serves several of my goals when teaching about social norms. First, students feel the frustration when people violate social norms (often, passionate debates have sparked during this activity). Also, as social psychology classes are comprised of mostly women, my students learn that social norms are understood so pervasively that we can apply our knowledge about what is appropriate even in situations in which most of us have never encountered (e.g., the men’s bathroom). In my experience, this activity makes learning about social norms fun. Whenever I can create an activity that is not only hands-on and has real world application, but can also have the pleasant side effect of making learning fun, students develop a positive attitude toward learning social psychology.

**Online Courses: My Hybrid, Flipped Classroom, and Applied Learning Approach**

This semester, I have developed applied projects for my online courses that already received positive student feedback. For example, students in my Social Psychology class are building a website where they will be running for President. They will outline their plans for the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustice in America while employing persuasion techniques and attitude theories. Not only will students learn how to apply their new knowledge about Social Psychology, but they will also improve their digital literacy skills, which will be assessed. In addition, students in my Death Dying and Bereavement class learned how to write obituaries
and created websites that memorialized any celebrity/famous person of their choice. One student did an outstanding job memorializing Bob Marley in her online obituary and she appeared to appreciate my approach for this assignment, “I really enjoyed this assignment! I hope you do as well.”

In my experience, students can best express their creativity and demonstrate their new found knowledge in online media. Indeed, my colleague and I provided a well-received workshop about measuring digital literacy in the classroom for faculty (Yancu & DeBono, 2020). Projects such as these are a two-for-one; students apply what they have learned in the course while improving their digital literacy skills – which are often critical in today’s workplace.

I have also found that combining both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to my online courses has resulted in greater student success. Few students are failing; nearly the entire class is earning a C or better. I believe this is due to my balance of zoom meetings and working-on-your own time which has created a flexible classroom without requiring an overwhelming amount of screen time. Furthermore, students have asked to enroll in my online courses next semester for exactly this reason. For example, Thomisha Tucker (enrolled in both my Fall 2020 Social Psychology and Death Dying and Bereavement courses) emailed me, “I am writing because I will be registering for Spring semester soon and I need 2 more Psychology classes to take for my minor. I have enjoyed both of your Psychology classes so far and was wondering if you teach any other psych. courses?” I plan to continue using this hybrid approach because it has resulted in higher achievement in the course and more specifically, I have also found that students are more likely to attend class than my colleagues who only use the synchronous approach which aligns well with previous research on online learning (e.g., Martyn, 2003). In my experience, combining both approaches appears to lessen screen time burnout for my students.

Furthermore, flipping the classroom in my online courses has also improved student outcomes in the course, which is supported by research on teaching in higher education (e.g., Crews & Butterfield, 2014). In my Social Psychology course, I record my lectures with Panopto and use our Zoom classes to discuss how the course is going, prepare for upcoming quizzes, review upcoming modules in Canvas, and check-in on my students’ overall well-being. My students appear to appreciate this approach, as indicated by Ayonna Waddell from my Fall 2020 Social Psychology course, “I am really enjoying your teaching style & how you structure class. I want to be able to complete my psych minor next semester, what classes in the Spring do you teach just so I can know for my advising meeting?”. I have enjoyed teaching online more than I expected and look forward to developing more online courses using the approaches that have proved successful. I am happy to report that both Ayonna and Thomisha plan to take Personality Psychology online with me in Spring 2020.

Service Learning
In my Abnormal Behavior course, in lieu of the traditional final paper, students write and illustrate a children’s book which are printed as hard copy books (funded through the university) and the students read them to local children (e.g., Boys and Girls Club). The books that many students submit are impressive; the illustrations are beautiful and my students tell stories, at a child’s level, about psychological disorders to reduce the stigma associated with these disorders. One of my favorite aspects of this assignment is that it connects our students with the local community and makes the topic of mental health as less taboo topic. By educating children on these disorders, my students reported feeling greater confidence in their ability to educate others on mental health (DeBono, 2019). I always strive to improve the projects I assign to students, so researching the effectiveness of this project is helping me become a better professor as well.
Writing my Own Textbook

Having taught Research Methods and Statistics courses for 10 years, I have been disappointed by the textbooks on these topics. Now that we have developed a year-long sequence on both these topics, our options are further limited because most textbooks only discuss research methods or statistics. While we have been using a textbook that addresses both topics and how they are intertwined, the text goes into details that are more appropriate for a graduate level course. As a result, I started developing my own Research Methods and Statistics textbook, which was published this summer (DeBono, 2020). This peer-reviewed book will be an excellent tool for our students so that they can learn the essentials about research methods and statistics so that they are well-prepared for the workforce or graduate school. Royalties from all WSSU student purchases of the textbook will be funding our department.

Curriculum Development

My largest contribution to curriculum development lies in our department’s reorganization of research methods and statistics. After advocating for creating a course in which statistics and research would be taught simultaneously, our department agreed that our students would greatly benefit by being taught these two concepts at the same time, thereby facilitating learning of these two intricately related topics.

Along with two colleagues, we created two new courses: Research Methods and Statistics I and II (RMSI and RMSII). We designed the course descriptions and outcomes for RMSI and II, as well as the schedule for RMSI. These courses were designed to be hands-on courses in which students developed their own research studies. Being the first instructor to teach RMSII, I designed the schedule for that course.

In RMS I, among several topics related to research and statistics, students learn about correlational design (while learning about how to calculate a correlation) and basic experimental design (while learning how to calculate independent and dependent t-tests). In this course, students also create their own IRB proposal for either a correlational study or 2 group experiments. Prior to designing their own study, students participate in several correlational and 2 group experiments. For example, students may be randomly assigned to view a picture of an overweight and normal weight person and report how lazy they believe the person is. Afterwards, students are debriefed and explained that the study predicted that people have stereotypes about overweight people being lazier than normal weight people. This provides students with the hands-on learning that provides examples for them to mimic in the development of their own research studies. Throughout these courses, students are constantly tweaking their research plans and hypotheses. Towards the end of the course, students collect data on campus for their study and write up their results as part of an APA-format paper. This includes an introduction section (which they develop in their Advanced Writing in Psychological Sciences course), as well as a methods, results, and discussion sections. In RMS II, students learn more sophisticated research methods techniques and more advanced statistics. More specifically, students learn about 3-group experiments (and one-way ANOVA simultaneously) and factorial design (as well as two-way ANOVA). Students conduct either a 3-group or a 2x2 experiment to further test the hypothesis they developed in RMS I. Students revise their final papers from RMSI and supplement it with their findings from their RMSII experiment.

Prior to this revision to the curriculum, student learned about statistics and research methods separately, almost as if these concepts were not completely interrelated. As a result of this revision to the curriculum, students have gained a better understanding of research methods and statistics. The quality of their research papers has greatly improved. Overall, Psychology
majors are more willing to present at our annual departmental research symposium and their presentations demonstrate a much more sophisticated and fuller understanding of their research design and statistical procedures.

I hope to further assist the Department of Psychological Sciences in our plans to revise our curriculum. In the future, I hope to develop new courses that will assist the university’s overall curriculum development.

Preparing Students for Careers and Graduate School

Sometimes while applying course content to the real world, a happy side effect is that the narratives I provide also provide important information about how students can succeed in their careers and graduate school. When I see in my students eyes that they cannot possibly digest any additional information on statistics of research methods (which happens from time to time), I will take a few minutes to discuss a few of the tips I learned from my post-graduate jobs and graduate school experiences. This often leads into a brief, but helpful Q & A session in which students feel comfortable asking about a variety of topics including: being rejected from graduate programs, GRE preparation, interviewing for jobs, and what to do when about hating the jobs once you have them. In many courses, sometimes as part of teaching course content, I will describe my job working hands-on with patients at a drug rehabilitation center, how earning my master’s degree in psychology steered me towards research specifically in social psychology, my experience recruiting drug-addicted pregnant women for research study at Columbia University, and my everyday experiences as a graduate student both at the master’s and doctoral program. By having these discussions, students have considered career and academic paths they had not considered before. My teaching evaluations and discussions with students both during and after my courses indicate that this advice is appreciated by my students. For example, one student e-mailed me, “I'm honestly a little sad that RMS II is over. You really got me comfortable and interested in statistics! I feel a little more prepared for graduate study because of the time I've had in your classes.”. Students often come to my office to discuss graduate school and research opportunities because of their comfort level with me.

Since being hired at Winston-Salem State, I recruited 30 students as research assistants. Every year, we present talks at posters at national and regional conferences as well as WSSU’s Scholarship Day. Not only have my research assistants become excited about research (which is not an easy task), but they also are networking at these conferences thereby increasing their chances of being accepted at graduate programs. For example, one of my outstanding research assistants, Natarshia Corley, reported her experience while working with me in the “Building Bridges through Undergraduate Research” program:

As a freshman, the idea of research was overwhelming and seemed like an unenjoyable task. Fortunately, Dr. DeBono quickly took me under her wing and showed me the ropes. Before I knew it, I was interviewing participants, analyzing data, and gaining a better understanding of the process for developing a publishable article. In February 2014, I was able to travel to the 15th Annual Society for Personality and Social Psychology conference held in Austin, TX. The conference afforded the opportunity to present posters for two of Dr. DeBono’s current research endeavors. Also, I was able to connect and to network with professors and graduate students from across the United States and Canada.

By obtaining student funding from our Provost, my students have gratefully presented at conferences around the country.
In addition to presenting at national and regional conferences, my students regularly present the results from their studies conducted as a part of class at our annual research symposium (two to seven students per year). Beginning my first year, my research assistants presented between two to five presentations per year. This type of mentorship is imperative for success in being accepted into graduate school as well as performing well while attaining their degrees. Indeed, Ms. Corley co-authored two publications with me and was recently accepted with full funding into The Ohio State University’s Ph.D. program in Social Psychology (she turned down two other fully funded offers at the University of Michigan and Wayne State). I look forward to seeing all my students’ continued success in graduate school and beyond (please see list of research assistants and examples of research excellence for more details).

Advising and Mentoring
Advising students is one of my favorite parts about my position at WSSU. It gives me the opportunity to have one-on-one sessions with students which enables me to guide them not only in their coursework, but their life after graduation. Overall, my advisees report being very satisfied with my guidance. For example, one of my frequently-visited advisees commented, “Very honest and straight forward. Great person to be around. Motivated me to be the best student I can be!”. Several of my advisees needed several visits throughout the semester to stay on track.

Originally, I allotted 15 minute appointments with students, as was customary at my previous positions at the University at Albany and the University of Bridgeport. I have realized this is not enough time to fully understand my advisees’ situations when it comes to their schoolwork, personal life, and work life. I now dedicate an hour to each advisee to assist them with their coursework, encourage them to get involved with research, discover any personal problems that may cause hurdles in their ability to achieve their academic goals, and consider professional and academic opportunities after graduate school. Another student commented in a Mentoring Evaluation Form, “She has always been there to help me make decisions about my WSSU coursework as well as personal life decisions and graduate school. She’s amazing and I’ve really appreciated our relationship”. Overall, my mentoring and advising evaluations have been consistently positive throughout my time at WSSU.

Striving to be a Better Teacher
While my teaching evaluations are good overall, they are not perfect and a few students have expressed some dissatisfaction with my courses. While it is unsurprising to earn less than perfect scores (especially when teaching courses such as research methods and statistics), I do take to heart the comments that students write in their course evaluations. Over the last 5 years, I have worked to make myself more approachable to students and as a result, my scores have improved overall while negative comments have diminished and positive comments have increased. By attending workshops and webinars offered by CETL (Center for Education, Teaching, and Learning; now CITI – Center for Innovative and Transformative Instruction) and other educational programs (e.g., Keys to Improving Student Learning and Evidence-Based Active Learning Workshops), I have incorporated ice breakers and fun testing activities to make the educational process more fun and less burdensome to students. As I have grown more comfortable in my teaching position, I started to share personal stories that, while teaching important lessons in psychology, also foster more comfortable relationships with my students.

One of the best aspects of being a college professor is that I am never done learning, and I view professorship as a learning process. Every semester, I learn and grow, changing and tweaking
courses so that my students have a better experience the next time around. I hope to continue improving my pedagogy for years to come.

Always Learning
Having my Ph.D. in Social-Personality Psychology has enabled me to often teach our Social and Personality Psychology courses which I learned a great deal about in my doctoral program. Attending 1-2 Social/Personality conferences each year has helped me stay on top of the latest findings in these fields. I always impart information I learned at these conferences to my students in these types of courses.

As a research methods and statistics professor, I always seek additional educational opportunities on these topics. For example, our Center for Education Teaching and Learning (CETL now renamed CITI) offered a meta-analysis workshop. This two-day workshop helped me better understand meta-analytic methods and provided me with ideas for conducting my own meta-analysis in the future. It also helped me better teach this type of statistical analysis in a way that is appropriate for the undergraduate level.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt it was quite important to improve my online teaching skills. As a result, I have participated in several workshops related to teaching online. For example, CITI has taught me new techniques and best practices for using Canvas and Zoom. I have also participated in workshops outside of WSSU to learn about best practices for teaching Psychology online.

Most importantly, I am always learning from my students. This has never been more important that when I went fully online for Fall 2020. Consequently, receiving student feedback to ensure my students had the best virtual classroom experience was extremely important to me. At the beginning of the semester, I asked students what they could do to ensure their success in the course (to help students feel some accountability for their own progress) and what I could do to provide an experience where they could succeed. The feedback was invaluable and several themes emerged: have reasonable due dates for assignments, make the classroom as fun and engaging as possible, create discussion boards for more classroom interactions, and allow time during our Zoom sessions for students to speak to each other informally. I addressed all these issues and I think it is one of the reasons why my attendance is so high and students are doing quite well in all my courses. For example, due dates are quite reasonable; I ask my students if the due date is reasonable when provided assigned work, and students can ask for extensions (I also build in a few days wiggle room on all assignments). I have also created discussion boards and chats to start conversations about the 2020 election and for students to share tips on how to do well in online courses. Students have 15 minutes at the end of every Zoom session to informally chat. Assignments are often non-traditional (please see several of these assignments discussed above regarding online courses) and involve applying their newfound knowledge. Humor and brief videos are used throughout my Panopto lectures. Clearly, I strongly believe that when students feel heard, and they see that they are being heard through their professor’s actions (not just lip service), they feel more invested in their courses and that has been quite evident in all my courses, especially during these last fully online semesters.
References


