

## Newton Teaching Statement

“Oh, I get it!” The ‘aha’ moment is possibly the greatest of rewards when teaching, whether it is a slow dawning or an epiphany. I have experienced both types of understanding when guiding students through one of the most difficult components of the research process: Operationalization, or how to translate an abstract construct into something that can be measured – something psychologists do almost every day. In this particular instance, the problem was to operationalize ‘group domination’ using the game of Pictionary with the objective of identifying gender differences. Four unknowing students (two female, two male) engaged in the game while their classmates observed how they responded. The challenge came when the observing students attempted to define dominating behavior and measure it. After much wrangling, the students reached agreement: the number and manner of interjections and guesses at the answer was how we operationalized domination in this setting. The game proceeded, and we found that for this sample (Introduction to the Psychology of Personality students in my Thursday discussion sections), there were no gender differences in group domination. The satisfaction of seeing that initial realization and understanding on students’ faces was exceeded only by later encounters with them; for example, bumping into a student while shopping, whose first comment was “You know, I’ll always remember what ‘operationalization’ is from your class!”

My approach to the pedagogy of psychology is informed by my passion for the topic, and is reflected in my over-arching goal for students’ learning: the ability to apply the theories and concepts studied in class to their own lives, and to those of the people who populate their world. To achieve that goal, I have three core teaching values: open communication, flexibility, and responsibility. The first involves making sure students feel comfortable asking questions when they don’t understand the material, and providing them with different forums for such question-asking: in class, in office hours, over e-mail, or by appointment. The second of my core values – flexibility – requires me to recognize the variability in students’ needs, and to structure students’ classroom experiences in such a way as to maximize their potential for learning. Responsibility, my third core value, connects and underscores the other two: As a teacher it is my responsibility to present material in a way that can be understood, and to make sure, to the best of my ability, that students understand. My expectations for students mirror these values. Students should aim to communicate openly their ideas and responses while respecting those of others, and to approach the concepts they are studying with openness and flexibility. And just as I am responsible to them as a teacher, they also have some level of responsibility for their learning experience.

I aim to present and explore new concepts and ideas in a neutral or bipartisan way, and encourage them to do the same. By using examples from familiar settings – such as college life - to gently challenge their assumptions and experiences of differences based on race, gender, class, or age, I encourage students to explore other points of view. For example, exploring the idea of who, historically, has had full access to education is often relevant when examining the ‘grand theories’ of psychology. My own experiences help to some extent: Although my undergraduate and graduate education took place in the United States, I am a New Zealander undertaking psychology as a second career, and I bring unique perspectives to the academic experience – as do my students.

Getting students focused and allowing them to make connections between concepts is very important, and a quiet minute in which to recall key concepts at the beginning of a discussion section can achieve this. Creating a ‘word cloud’ from these key concepts and then encouraging students to categorize or connect themes is also effective. Not all students feel comfortable

responding verbally in a large class, so I give students the option to write a paragraph with their opinions, thoughts, questions, or observations regarding class materials and this is used to evaluate their participation. Learning styles differ; whenever possible, students are organized into pairs or small groups for activities related to class material, with a report-back as a class or section to round out the activity. Often this involves reading media stories from papers such as the New York Times, answering questions, and then coming up with an example from their own lives. Also effective are video or audio clips that illustrate a topic; movies are often useful tools for quickly illustrating different personalities, and the BBC series “7-Up” (with the latest installment at 56-Up) is a great resource for demonstrating life span personality development.

Assessing student learning can be difficult, given that often the accepted exam format may not capture all students' progress. A mix of exams, papers and group presentations can be effective. Early in the semester, I model possibilities for group presentation formats; I also clearly articulate the components of a research paper. Wherever possible, I make a grading rubric available for any student assessment, whether exam or project, and give examples of previous successful papers or presentations. In this way, assessment processes are made transparent to the student, providing clear practical goals for their work.

Finally, I really enjoy being surprised, especially when students are able to provide a different rationale for a concept or construct we are studying, and I encourage students to actively question not only their assumptions, but my assumptions, as well as the assumptions of those around them. In this way, creativity of thought is fostered within a framework of openness and respect for the ideas of others. Connections are forged, abstract theories are made concrete, and perhaps the seed of passion for psychology is planted in the next generation.

As both a graduate student instructor at University of Michigan and Assistant Professor at Youngstown State University, I have taught Lifespan Development Psychology, Introduction to the Psychology of Personality, Introduction to Psychology, Research Methods & Statistics, and Political Psychology to students who ranged from younger individuals just beginning their adult lives, to seasoned midlife adults who sought change in their careers. Further teaching interests include Adult Development and Aging, the Psychology of Identity, Adult Personality Development, Psychology of Women, and the Psychology of Gender – or any combination thereof. In my capacity as a Research Assistant Professor at Northwestern University, I have had the pleasure of guiding a number of students through the research process. I enjoy both classroom teaching and one-to-one instruction.