# Teaching Philosophy

“Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.”

Nelson Mandela

Education is the forefront of change. Through education we can teach the next generation to achieve their wildest dreams and transform the world for the better. Helping foster this change is the basis of my teaching philosophy. The students of today will become the leaders of tomorrow. I believe that the best way to help students become agents of change in their own worlds is to ignite their curiosity, promote creativity and teach them to think critically about the world around them. These goals help to inform the way I design and practice teaching. To achieve these goals, I structure my courses around three basic principles: teaching students’ competence, autonomy and being focused on the learner.

## **Competence**

To support competence, or the ability to do something successfully or efficiently, I use evidence-based methods to help students understand course content. Cognitive constructivist theories of teaching support the idea that learning happens best when students are discovering and actively engaging with course materials[[1]](#footnote-1). Active learning has been shown to help students retain information[[2]](#footnote-2), close achievement gaps for underrepresented students, and leads to lower failure rates for all students[[3]](#footnote-3). To promote active learning I follow the “I do” “We do” “You do” model of teaching. This involves me explaining content to students, then they work in teams with me offering support to work together to solve a problem, and lastly we come back as a group and students think about the content on their own and discuss what they’ve learned. I also use retrieval practice at the end of each class in the form of “exit tickets” to help students retain the material with lower stakes. Students respond well and enjoy these exit tickets, *“Exit tickets are a nice addition. It make some actually think of what just happened instead of just repressing it the moment class ends (as I do in some other classes)”.*

Collaboration increases critical thinking and creativity, but mostly when done in combination with solitary work[[4]](#footnote-4). Therefore, I have implemented group exams in some cases where it fits with the content and learning objectives. In this model, students complete the exam on their own first and then form groups to discuss the exam questions. This allows them to teach the material to others when they are confident, learn from others when they are less so, and learn to collaborate and talk through ideas and solutions all while hearing feedback from me.

To promote creativity and critical thinking, I use multimodal assignments, where students are able to deliver the content of their research in any format that they wish. In my history of psychology course, I have had students turn in crime scene boards, design websites, create children’s stories, create a podcast, write short books, and so much more. When students follow their own mode of presentation, they can learn skills outside of writing papers that may serve them in their future careers. It gives them expertise outside of my discipline and allows them to be more engaged in the project and potentially share what they’ve learned with a wider audience than my course.

## **Autonomy**

As a teacher, I am focused on providing students with not only the learning of new material, but giving them a sense of autonomy so that they may transfer learning in my course to other areas of their lives and other courses. It seems that each year I teach I notice more and more that students show up to class simply trying to get a good grade so they can move on and finish their degree without genuinely caring about material or how to study effectively. Teaching courses at the freshman or sophomore level allows a prime time for engaging students in becoming independent thinkers and learners. Teaching psychology allows me to use principles of memory, learning and problem solving to help students learn not only the course content, but how to relate that content to their own lives and studying. For example, I structure examples for these chapters in introductory psychology to their everyday lives. I ask each student how they study for exams and we write the methods on the board. Then we go through each one to relate them to memory and learning concepts learned in class and why they do or do not work for studying material. This allows students to see first-hand which practices are good and which has been shown not to work so they can use this information in all their courses while still relating to course content.

At every stage of my lessons and assignments, I provide detailed feedback to students. I want them to learn how to change their work for the better, how to create a better product in other classes, and how to learn the metacognition necessary to make these changes on their own. Therefore, I always provide feedback both on what they have done well and should continue doing and what they can or need to improve on. Student comments demonstrate the effectiveness of this feedback, *“I really enjoyed getting feedback on my paper and being able to redo it to improve. This was the first time I’ve received feedback like this and been allowed to improve my paper. It really helped”* and *“ I enjoyed getting feedback on assignments. It was nice to know exactly what I needed to work on instead of just guessing.”*

Lastly to support autonomy, I create assignments for students to take control over their own learning. Students find their own resources on given topics and share them with the class. We have regular discussions in class where students are responsible for generating several discussion questions to encourage the conversation. We discuss the material and its impact on their lives and their learning in detail. During these discussions, I prompt students often to tell me their conclusions, opinions, ideas and thoughts on the topics to prompt them to think outside of the material and relate it to their lives and to outside classes or experiences.

## **Learner Focused Pedagogy**

Learner focused pedagogy means that I structure everything in my courses with the learner in mind first. I start with the learning objectives that I want students to come away with at the end of the semester and at the end of each lesson. I design everything around what I want them to learn. I also take the learner into account when finding activities and research that demonstrates how students learn most effectively. I ask for feedback from students themselves throughout the semester to check in with what is working and not working for them to make changes before it is too late. My class has drastically improved from this feedback as I get to know what works for this generation of students and I learn about new ways of approaching material and even new technologies that have been helpful (e.g., GroupMe).

Students learn better when they feel comfortable, safe and supported. Part of being focused on the learner means to be as approachable for them as possible. I tell students to communicate with me in multiple methods: email, Zoom, chat functions on LMS, Twitter, GroupMe or any other method that they wish to use. Students have commented on this level of approachability, *“She is a great and approachable teacher”* and “*I want her to know that she has been an awesome professor this semester and does her best to make sure her students are doing well in the course”.*

## **Conclusion**

Higher education is a place for students to learn to think critically, challenge what they think they know, and learn about new concepts and ideas. Through this education we can help a new generation enjoy learning and make a change in the world. To challenge students to new levels of thinking I combine teaching competence, autonomy and focusing on the learner when designing courses. This allows students to not only learn the material in my own course, but to hopefully learn life skills that will transfer to other courses, their careers and their lives.

1. Graduate Student Instructor Teaching & Resource Center, Berkley Graduate Division. https://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/learning-theory-research/learning-overview/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carpenter, S.K., Witherby, A.E., & Tauber, S.K. (2020). On students’ (mis)judgements of learning and teaching effectiveness. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, <https://gsi.berkeley.edu/gsi-guide-contents/learning-theory-research/learning-overview/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Theobold, E.J., et al. (2020). Active learning narrows achievement gaps for underrepresented students in undergraduate science, technology, engineering, and math. *PNAS*. Doi:  <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1916903117> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scott Bary Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire. *Wired to Create.* Penguin Random House, New York: NY [↑](#footnote-ref-4)