

# Teaching Philosophy – “Changing Lives”

Marisa D. Mealy  
Central Connecticut State University

---

Teaching is not just about instructing. It is a way to change lives. A person who enters a classroom can walk out with a new way of understanding the world. Thus, my goal is to expose students to material and guide them through the process of integrating it into their lives. As such, I have three primary teaching goals that are applicable for all courses: to promote the application of material to real life, to encourage new ways of thinking, and to facilitate a feeling of comfort with the material.

## Applying Material to Real Life

Learning is the result of more than just mere exposure to a subject: It is the product of active involvement with subject matter through thinking, interacting, and applying the material. For real learning to occur, students must be able to both retain and utilize their newly acquired knowledge.

### *Retention*

One significant motivator in my philosophy of teaching is that, after graduation, students retain only a small fraction of material they obtained in college. This guides the design of each of my classes: I try to ensure that the material I provide will have a lasting effect on student's lives. When I look back on my own undergraduate studies, I realize that I remember much more from my experiences than from course material. Consequently, I firmly believe that students are more likely to remember material when it is based on experience and critical thinking as opposed to simple “rote learning”. In other words, students should do to learn. With this in mind, I try to make my courses guided experiences, rather than classes in the traditional sense.

One of the simplest ways in which I try to achieve this goal is through group work. Thus, a good portion of each class that I teach requires the active involvement of my students with the material, as opposed to a passive absorption of my knowledge. Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of this technique may, to the casual observer, appear to be a byproduct rather than an actual objective: friendship. Yet, in reality in many of my classes this is carefully orchestrated for educational purposes.

For example, at the beginning of my psychology of diversity class, I asked each student to write a paper explaining how they identify themselves. I then had students stand in a line according to their identity and number off. In this way, each group was composed of people with different attitudes, religions, races, and experiences. Students interacted with these groups on a regular basis throughout the course, and discussed many serious topics. These groups provided students with the opportunity to socialize with diverse people, as well as to hear divergent opinions on topics. Consequently, students were not only learning about diversity theory, but were constantly working together, as a team, with people with whom they may not identify with under normal circumstances.

Another experiential tactic that I have used is role playing activities. Again, in my diversity class, I assigned students the roles of therapists and clients with divergent attitudes. One pairing of students might include a “therapist” with conservative Christian views, working with a “client” who has recently decided to convert from Christianity to Buddhism. Another pairing might include a heterosexual “therapist” with an upper middle class background “counseling” a person from a lower socio-economic background about issues they are experiencing in relation to their child's homosexuality. The purpose of this exercise was not to illustrate right vs. wrong viewpoints, but rather to demonstrate the difficulty people encounter when counseling, or even being friends with, someone from a different background or viewpoint.

In my cross-cultural psychology course, I conducted a number of activities in which students were instructed to behave in ways that were inconsistent with North American cultural norms. One of these activities involved communication. Students were divided into pairs and instructed to solve a simple problem. The first partner was told to communicate by using the Arabic cultural norm of “musayara” (promote harmony, use extreme politeness and respect for the other, and to speak with verbal flourishes, metaphors, illusions and subtlety). The other set of students was instructed to communicate by using the Israeli cultural norm of “dugri” (be direct and forceful, prefer simplicity, and be confrontational when deemed necessary.) As a result there were difficulties in communication, which were discussed at the completion of the activity. Students felt this activity helped them to understand how different communication styles could be misunderstood or perceived as offensive. It also helped them to understand a potential cause of global conflict.

Finally, I also strive to facilitate retention of material by creating opportunities for out-of-class experiences. In my cross-cultural psychology course, I gave students the option of having weekly meetings with someone from another country and keeping a journal about their interactions. A similar activity has been generated for my diversity class in which students should become involved with a club, church, or other organization with which they are not familiar, and with whom they would not have had previous contact. The intention of these activities is to create learning through social situations and friendships

### *Application*

I believe that true learning is achieved by understanding the relationship between new information and existing knowledge structures. Once the connection is made, learning is immediate. Thus, in all of my classes, I strive to apply the information to real life.

When teaching General Psychology, one anecdote I have used to illustrate classical conditioning involves a friend of mine and the smell of chlorine. I explain that my friend might be considered a bit strange, because he gets “turned on” by the smell of chlorine. The reason is that when he was a teenager he had a crush on a really hot lifeguard at the neighborhood pool. He would frequently go there and feel turned on by looking at her. Consequently, my friend has grown to associate the smell of chlorine with being “turned on”. I explain that the unconditioned stimulus is the hot lifeguard, and the unconditioned response is that he feels “turned on”. The conditioned stimulus is the smell of chlorine and the conditioned response is that he feels “turned on”. I also explain how these types of automatic responses could work with perfumes, songs, or even locations.

During my research methods course (in addition to having students conduct their own experiment) I assigned a number of activities to help students be actively involved in applying the course material to real life situations. In one activity students were instructed to read vignettes that described correlational results. These vignettes included: “When the physical attractiveness of high school girls was rated by their peers, it was noticed that those with the highest scores tended to do the best on a measure of self-esteem on record in the guidance office” and “A survey reveals that college students who eat breakfast regularly have a higher GPA than those that don't eat breakfast regularly.” For each scenario students explained whether the correlation was positive or negative and provided two possible explanations for the relationship. This activity provided an opportunity for students to understand the ways in which knowledge acquired in the research methods course offers valuable tools that can help them, not only in psychology, but also in day-to-day life.

## **Encourage New Ways of Thinking**

### *Critical Thinking*

According to Bain<sup>1</sup> (2004), “...the best teachers tend to embed the discipline's issues in broader concerns, often taking an interdisciplinary approach to problems.” I believe the right college experience can transform the way students think forever. A person who enters a classroom can walk out with a new way of understanding the world. Thus, in accordance with Bain's advice I encourage my students to “compare, apply, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize, but NEVER only to listen and remember.”

For example, when teaching General Psychology, I dedicate one entire class to critical thinking. I begin this class by discussing common myths such as: "Razor blades, needles, and poison are commonly found in Halloween candy." I ask students if they believe this to be true, and why they believe it. Next, I explain that this is a myth and explain that the reality is that there have been very few cases of razor blades or needles found in Halloween candy, and that, in the only known case of a child dying from poison in Halloween candy, the parents of the child had put the poison there. At the end of my Fall 2006, one of my students came up to me with a laptop. He had looked up the information on snopes.com and was able to tell me that there had been only 13 documented cases of needles in Halloween candy and none of razor blades or poison put there by strangers. In that moment, I knew that my message had been communicated: students should evaluate information for themselves and search for answers from reliable sources. In other words, they should not simply accept what someone else says.

One activity that I used during my psychology of diversity class was to divide the class into groups and have them debate pro-immigration attitudes and anti-immigration attitudes, regardless of their own beliefs. After a brief moderated presentation of the arguments for each side, we discussed what students had learned. Students found that they were challenged to look at more than one side of the issues and to critically evaluate their own arguments as well as the arguments of their classmates.

During my research methods course, I implemented an activity that required students to utilize critical thinking skills by examining various examples of fallacious reasoning. Students were told that good research requires that simplistic or erroneous reasoning be avoided. They were then provided with 14 statements that are common in discussions of human behavior and psychology. The items included: "We cannot conclusively prove the existence of the unconscious mind, therefore it is a fiction: it does not exist" and "Both Uncle Albert and cousin Mary Ann committed suicide, which makes me think it must run in my family." Students were instructed to identify which common fallacy in reasoning was used in each circumstance. Possible answers included: appeal to ignorance, slippery slope, false alternatives, hasty generalizations and questionable analogies.

Thus, in all of my classes, I strive to facilitate critical thinking. I ensure that my students leave my class with a stronger ability to understand and critique experiments, media excerpts, and other materials that they will encounter in their daily life.

### **Comfort with Material**

I believe that if a student is uncomfortable with or afraid of course material they will not think about or approach the topic when it is not necessary. Hence, one way in which I strive to facilitate learning, is through the creation of an atmosphere that promotes comfort with (and interest in) the topic.

#### *Class Environment*

I find that one of the most important components in creating an air of comfort in a classroom is the creation of an informal atmosphere in which the student feels as if they are an equal, a person to be respected. In an attempt to create this atmosphere, I use a mixture of both common and unorthodox methods. In general, I try to communicate on the level of the students as opposed to trying to demonstrate my superior knowledge. As such, I have been known to do something as simple as sitting with them in a circular format for discussions. I believe that this creates an atmosphere where I am perceived of as a participant as opposed to an all-knowledgeable guru. In this way, I hope to move the focus from me and my knowledge, onto them and the process of learning, in a comfortable manner. At times, I have even gone as far as to sit cross-legged on top of a table.

I approach each class as if I expect students to listen, think, and respond; not only to take notes. As such, regardless of whether I am lecturing, facilitating group work, or promoting discussion, I try to ensure that class is perceived as a dialogue rather than as someone “imparting knowledge”. I constantly ask questions, review material, and give students the opportunity to express ideas, ask questions, or communicate confusion. In fact, I go out of my way to provide an environment that students will find challenging yet safe: a place that they can try, fail, receive feedback, and try again without facing a summative evaluation. In this way, students are encouraged to speak up, even to give wrong answers, and thereby feel comfortable rather than intimidated by material.

As a part of the class dialogue, I do not just tell stories, but I also pay close attention to my students. I examine the looks on their faces and try to understand if they are bored or interested. Am I stimulating any thought processes? If faces appear to be distracted, I change my teaching tactic

Finally, I also try to create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable with one another as well as with me. Thus, I try to facilitate interaction between as many students as possible in the class and to generate a feeling of camaraderie. This can be generated, in part, by group work, discussions, and icebreakers.

### *Attitude toward Students*

I also try to maintain a positive attitude towards my students and their abilities at all times. I go out of my way to demonstrate trust in each student. Thus, in my general psychology class, although I may have up to 200 people, I rarely use proctors; I only use different versions for exams. In this way, students know that looking at another student’s exam will not be beneficial to them, but they do not feel that they are under any type of military surveillance. In upper division courses, I often give take home exams.

I try to see students as people and identify with their experiences. I constantly recall my own time as an undergraduate and think about what professors did, or could have done, which would have benefited me and my learning.

It is also important that I do not expect students to regurgitate the opinions or ideas that I give them. In fact, I want students to construct their own understanding. Hence, they are never penalized for disagreeing or thinking about things differently, and are even allowed to appeal answers on exams. As long as students can demonstrate understanding of the topic, I will, at all times, respect their opinions, attitude, and way of communication.

I try to see everything from the perspective of the students. I go out of my way to provide explanations that students can conceptually understand. In fact, as Bain (2004) suggested, I tend to start with familiar explanations that will help the learner develop a good understanding of the topic, rather than focusing on the most accurate and detailed explanation. Only after they have grasped the concept do I break it down further, gradually adding more complexity and the unknown. For example, in my research methods class, I always start my explanation of a standard deviation with a number like  $5 \pm 2$ . We then discuss the meaning of “plus or minus two”. At this point, we begin to apply that concept to a questionnaire with a Likert scale and, finally, break it down into an even more statistics oriented discussion. This summer, as I was teaching research methods II (for which all students must have successfully completed both an introduction to statistics course as well as research methods I), one of my students remarked “I think this is the first time I understand what a standard deviation really is.”

### **Conclusion**

I have explained my teaching methodology and my teaching goals. You know how I teach, but perhaps you wonder why I teach. The answer itself may be overly simple: I teach because I love to teach. I get a rush when I see a student grasp a new concept or begin to critically examine an area of study. When a class goes well I am on a high for hours, when a class does not go as well as expected I feel challenged to improve the class for the next time. I teach because it is constantly stimulating. I teach because I think, just maybe, I can make a difference. Just maybe, I can change a person's life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bain, K. (2004). What the Best College Teachers do. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.