

## **2017 PRESIDENTIAL TEACHING AWARD NOMINEE**



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A musician once told me that he was annoyed when someone said he was talented because he worked very hard at his craft. Not until recently did I understand what he meant and truly considered the term “talent”. I would love to be so talented at teaching that my skills were immediately obvious the day I walked onto the UIW campus. But instead, I have been humbled by the work it takes to reach my own high standards to provide effective instruction that has lasting value in students’ lives. I cannot judge whether I am truly talented at teaching, but I can say I thrive on teaching and so I keep practicing. Perhaps talent involves the enduring will to practice continually knowing it can always be improved. Thus, I approach teaching as a craft and an art that requires development, practice, creativity, perseverance, innovation, and flexibility

My teaching philosophy continues to evolve as I incorporate what I learn from my students, colleagues, friends, and family. Most importantly, I believe that effective teaching involves 1) motivating students to learn, apply, and think critically about psychology, while developing as individuals; 2) respecting my students and honestly caring about students’ development and success; and 3) extending student opportunities beyond the classroom.

### **EFFECTIVE TEACHING INVOLVES MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO LEARN THE PROCESS**

The craft of teaching requires skills and techniques to transfer knowledge to students, while the art of teaching encompasses motivating students to excel at understanding, applying, and elaborating on this knowledge. Students must integrate lecture material with information from the text to gain comprehensive knowledge, but reading and listening is not enough—sometimes they must also be taught technique. I provide students with PowerPoint slides before each class to promote organization when they take notes. I would rather they listen and note examples that I provide during class rather than write every word that is on each slide. I find that some students are resistant to this method, but those who embrace it acquire a new appreciation of what it takes to understand material rather than simply retain information long enough to test. College is about more than learning facts and theories; it is also about learning to think independently, draw reasonable inferences, integrate information, and think critically about what to believe and what to disregard. Thus, when a student indicates that in my class they learned to learn, I feel that I have accomplished something meaningful. I stress that while psychology is young, it is indeed a science that requires testing. I test students with factual, theoretical, and applied questions but these details are not likely to be recalled five years from now. The process and tools for finding and evaluating information is what they will use in the future. Students sometimes share articles with me that they find interesting or comment on another way that a research project could have been done. That is when I know that they are “taking it home”.

I believe students construct knowledge through active participation as suggested by Jean Piaget. By linking concepts to videos of human behavior, examples from my own life and students’ lives, and application thru service or research, students understand the underlying meaning and process of acquiring knowledge that will remain once the little details from class are long gone. In addition,

through collaborative learning with peers, students strengthen their knowledge and are held accountable to more than just themselves.

I believe in Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, which involves challenging the student to the next level by providing the necessary framework, especially when students are learning about research. Sometimes this framework is how to write a paper or how to improve chances for graduate school. I am open to students working with me on research although it is with the understanding that the commitment is high. I am proud of my research assistants who have collected EEG data, helped me clean and analyze the data, and then presented the findings with me at a national conferences. I am proud of the students who are willing to take on the challenge of Advanced Statistics so that they will be better prepared for graduate school.

### **EFFECTIVE TEACHING REQUIRES RESPECT FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AND DIVERSITY**

One of the joys and challenges of teaching at UIW is the recognition and celebration of diversity. I know that I can share my beliefs with others and students know that I will respect their beliefs. I work to be perceptive of the needs of the class as a whole while still respecting the individuality of each student. I encourage the students to communicate with me when they are confused, disagree with how a topic is presented, or are experiencing issues that may affect their understanding of the material.

Fairness is very important to me, but balancing fairness to all students with sensitivity to each individual is challenging. Thus, I have learned to be very clear in my expectations, stick to the guidelines that I have established, but still reach out to students who are struggling with a life crisis to provide alternative solutions. At UT-Austin, the care and concern I had for my students was viewed as a weakness, but in the UIW community it is viewed as a strength, and for that I am thankful.

### **EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN PSYCHOLOGY EXTENDS STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Psychology is focused on the human condition which presents ample opportunity to demonstrate through service. While I am involved in service both on and off campus, I was not sure how to incorporate it as a learning mechanism until I also participated in two Service Learning Workshops with the FOCUS faculty to improve retention and involvement past the first year. I now include a Service Learning Project in all of my Child Development classes. Students could find their own opportunities as long as it contributed to an agency that served children. Most comment in the final paper on how rewarding they found the project. In fall semesters, I can also combine service learning, understanding of material, and Meet the Mission.

In 2016, my Social Psychology class visited with intellectually disabled adults. It was an eye-opening experience for my students and also for me. In the following class period, we were able to discuss our experiences and how they relate to Social Psychology. I was honest with my students that I was outside my comfort zone, as I usually work with children. I believe this honesty helped them address their own concerns and speak openly. Some students who admitted to being uncomfortable indicated their intention to return now that they had the initial introduction to this work.

Fortunately, in Psychology, I can teach students about research that is informative to their education and life goals. For instance, Carol Dweck's theory and research suggests that students who believe that intelligence is fixed are more likely to give up when faced with challenging tasks or to blame someone else for their failure; conversely, students who believe intelligence can be increased incrementally through hard work are more likely to master material and be successful. The best part of this theory and what I teach in class is that students can change their mindset, and thus be more successful.

## **PROFESSIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

My proudest moments as a professor include my students' achievements. When I receive an evaluation, a thank you card, or an email update from current and former students describing any impact that I may have had on them, I feel validated as a teacher. I am most proud of feedback from students that I taught them how to learn not just memorize information. I also find it gratifying that regardless of any other rating on evaluations, I always get top marks for respecting students.

Other students have been kind enough to let me know when they have been accepted into graduate school and expressed appreciation that I challenged them in classes. One such student has continued to work on my research for the past 5 years, has co-authored conference presentations with me, and has just been accepted to the first class of the UIW Medical School—her lifelong dream.

I include in my achievements student opportunities to successfully study abroad or work in research. I believe these are transformational experiences for students opening their eyes to other cultures and experiences beyond their comfort zone.

In conclusion, my teaching philosophy highlights what I find most valuable in my own education as well as what I hope to help others achieve. I do not believe that development ever stops. This philosophy extends to my own teaching practices which I expect to continue to develop through the years.