Teaching & Mentoring Philosophy - Cristina Zepeda

Teaching

My teaching and research practices have served a complimentary role in my career as they continually inform and improve each other. Core to my research is understanding how students learn and how to facilitate their learning through instructional techniques, which I have applied to my own teaching and adapted to a variety of class sizes and content areas such as Research Methods Lab (24 undergrads), Post-Baccalaureate Seminar (4-5 post-baccalaureates), Central Topics in Learning Science Research (4 undergrads), and Cognitive Psychology (200 undergrads). For six quarters, I also taught sections of a course for UC San Diego's Education Studies Program focusing on preparing undergraduates to work with elementary school students (20 undergrads). My goal is for my students to be better self-regulated learners as they gain flexible and robust knowledge that they can use in my courses and other contexts. I also ensure that my classroom is a safe space where students feel comfortable to say that they do not know something, ask questions, generate examples from their unique experiences, and focus on mastering the material versus only focusing on their performance. To achieve these goals, I structure my teaching through the use of cognitive scaffolds, collaboration, motivation, and reflection. Below I discuss these four approaches to my teaching, my mentoring experiences, and my plans for my future teaching and mentoring experiences.

Cognitive scaffolds. One objective of mine is for students to learn about and apply effective learning strategies (e.g., retrieval practice, self-explanation, and analogical comparison). To achieve this objective, I discuss the utility of these strategies and design my course to incorporate these strategies through different activities. For example, in one activity, I asked students to describe the scientific process and then to compare and contrast their answers with another student in the class. Through this activity, students were able to identify what they understood, discuss common similarities between their responses, and practice sharing knowledge with others. I also have students complete a reflection every non-exam day that prompts them to evaluate what they learned (e.g., explain concept X in your own words), draw connections to previous topics (e.g., how does concept b relate to concept a?), or to relate the concepts to their outside interests (e.g., how does one of the concepts we covered this week relate to something you're interested in?).

Collaboration. I value that learning is a social process. Therefore, another objective I have is for students to work together and integrate their knowledge with each other. Using collaborative activities also allows students to feel more comfortable participating in whole-class discussions as they have a stronger sense of community. For example, in one of my courses, I grouped students based on their broader psychology interests (e.g., sports psychology, child psychology). Within a group, I gave each student one paragraph from a journal article's introduction. Then, they individually read their part, explained the meaning of their paragraph to their group, and as a group determined the order of the argument. Once the argument was established, students then critiqued the introduction to improve the argument and shared these critiques with the class. Throughout this collaborative activity, I checked in with the groups and then helped bridge the group's conclusions to the broader class discussion. By tapping into their interests and using collaboration, this activity helped them understand how to create a strong argument while establishing connections with their peers.

Motivation. A third objective I have is for students to be motivated learners. To motivate students, I incorporate their interests and create opportunities for growth. For example, I have them turn in drafts of their larger projects so they can receive feedback on the smaller segments and have an opportunity to improve their final product. Students can also meet with me to talk through the feedback, which we do in a normalized setting such as the local coffee shop or library, to damper any anxiety they might have about attending office hours. I also find it motivates students to learn when I know them as people. I learn their names and ask them about their goals for the course and their general interests. This allows me to better understand who my students are, and from this

understanding, I make efforts to personalize the materials by tailoring examples and activities to their interests.

Reflection. I implement my fourth objective by asking students to reflect on their learning experience and by reflecting on my teaching practices. At the end of each topic, I ask students to reflect on a new topic they learned or a topic they do not fully understand. Then, I review their responses and use them to inform how to structure the next class. If students are struggling with a specific topic, I review the topic at the beginning of class. Then halfway through the course, I implement progress checks to ask students how well they think they are learning the material, how well they think I am teaching, and how I might improve the course. Through these methods, my teaching is always improving.

Mentoring

One of the most rewarding aspects of my scientific pursuits is mentoring students with diverse backgrounds and experiences. *I have mentored 49 undergraduate students and post-baccalaureate fellows; 28 have or are now pursuing a graduate career.* Through my interactions with undergraduates in my courses, I have been invited by the Psychology Club to serve as a guest speaker and panelist. In addition to undergraduates, I have mentored five graduate students in and outside of the lab, providing support and resources to help them succeed in graduate school, prepare manuscripts, and design presentations. In the past few years, graduate students and post-baccalaureate students that I have worked with have reached out to ask if I would give a talk or participate on a panel. For example, I gave a talk to the Cognitive Psychology Program at the University of Pittsburgh on how to apply to postdoc positions and I served on a panel for the doctoral students in Education at UC Irvine on applying to postdoc and faculty positions.

My goal for all my mentees is for them to gain the knowledge and skills needed to achieve their goals and to enjoy the process. I encourage them if they are having difficulty with a task while also prompting them to reflect on ways they can improve. I engage them in the research process by encouraging them to ask questions and contribute their ideas during our meetings, which has resulted in thoughtful discussions and authorship roles. Above all, I try to demonstrate the importance and craft of creating a supportive community and the mutually beneficial relationships that can emerge from such a community. I, for one, always learn something new from my mentees.

Even after my mentees move on to their next endeavor, my door is always open to them. Many of them keep in contact and email me when they come across articles, technologies, or conferences they think I would enjoy. Those are the best emails because it shows how much they care. I am grateful that we keep in touch and I am excited when they ask for letters of recommendation – it is always wonderful to see them go on to the next step. I recently saw the first few graduate with their PhDs, and it was such a great feeling. For my efforts in mentoring, I received an excellence in mentoring award from the Psychology Department at the University of Pittsburgh.

Teaching Interests and Future Plans

To help students master material and improve their skills, I use creative approaches in a fun learning environment. I reflect on how I can improve and ways to be more innovative in my next approaches. I also seek out opportunities to improve my teaching by implementing different technologies, reading scholarly journals, and participating in workshops. For example, I took several courses at University of Pittsburgh's Teaching and Learning Center focusing on diversity and pedagogy and obtained their teaching certificate. **Going forward**, **I am especially interested in teaching** courses such as introduction to learning sciences, educational and cognitive psychology, and other introductory topics in psychology and learning; research methods; and advanced topics in cognition and learning (e.g., metacognition, motivation, and self-regulated learning). In addition to teaching those types of courses, there are many additional courses I would enjoy teaching such as those that focus on interdisciplinary approaches to education (e.g., how to translate research and collaborate with

researchers in other disciplines, collaborating with teachers) and applying psychological science to educational practice.