

Statement of Teaching Philosophy for Steve Davis

I honestly can't imagine another career that I would find as gratifying as that of teacher. Not only do I value the important job of helping students learn to think more critically, but also, I find the job to be a lot of fun! Leading a class is an exhilarating and stimulating experience, and I look forward to my interactions with students. I continue to explore new teaching techniques and to engage in the scholarship of pedagogy by presenting on teaching-related issues at various conferences. I also have expressed my commitment to quality teaching by serving as Chair of the Council of Education Programs (CEP) of the Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA; APA division 27). The CEP's main mission is to promote quality education in community psychology. This statement describes my main goals for my students and the methods I use to accomplish them.

Teaching: Goals and Methods

I strongly believe that it is important for teachers to have clear learning goals for their students. These goals are based on values that an institution and/or a teacher has, and in turn, they should dictate specific methods. While some of my goals for students are course-specific, others are more general. My philosophy of teaching is a work in progress and continues to evolve over time.

One of my main goals is to help students to *challenge their preconceived notions* about psychology, society, and themselves. An important problem that I see in many students is a phenomenon that developmental psychologists term "identity foreclosure"; that is, the students have made many decisions about their goals, beliefs, and values without ever having really thought through those decisions. I believe that the best way for students to confront their implicit assumptions and worldviews is to make them explicit through class discussion. Discussion also allows other students (and the teacher) to challenge those assumptions, giving students the opportunity to modify their worldviews in order to integrate new ideas.

The most important technique for encouraging discussion is to facilitate a supportive classroom environment, and I believe that I am generally successful in doing this. I try to keep my teaching style fairly informal and nonjudgmental, and try to find meaning in all student ideas, while gently challenging those ideas. I use reflective listening skills (similar to those I've used as a counselor) to paraphrase student ideas, and invite students to engage in dialogue with each other. Frequently when assigning a new reading, I provide students with "study/discussion questions" to guide them in identifying the main points of that reading. In class, students form small groups of 3-5 students to discuss those questions among themselves before we engage in whole-class discussion of the reading. This gives students practice in distinguishing main ideas from supporting ones (a challenging skill for many of them) and also gives the shyer students preparation for speaking aloud. Once we have identified the main ideas, I invite students to critique those ideas, encouraging them to provide reasons for their beliefs.

An important benefit of this emphasis on discussion is that students, once disabused of their assumptions, can begin to *interpret personal experiences in terms of psychological theory and research*. I believe that students who learn to apply psychology to their everyday lives will be more likely to become excited about the subject. For example, students in my Personality course often report that the most gratifying parts of the course are discussions around the short exercises that I assign. These exercises are designed to encourage students to assess their own personalities in light of various theories.

Of course, students do not always have a means to evaluate many ideas, and so another goal is to help them to develop such a means: the scientific method. I make *scientific literacy* a primary goal in all of my courses. In redesigning several of my clinical psychology courses, I placed a strong emphasis on helping students to distinguish pseudoscientific from scientific claims about mental health. I believe that one of the most useful skills that psychology students can learn is to be *critical consumers of psychological claims*

(although such a critical faculty doesn't always make them popular with friends and family who lack this perspective!). I also enjoy teaching students how to do science through mentoring them on independent studies, and through group projects in Research Methods courses.

Yet another goal of mine is to help students *develop the skills and attitudes to "give back" to society*. In some courses, such as Counseling and Abnormal Psychology, I help students develop specific clinical skills that they can use to help others. For example, students role-play diagnostic interviews and counseling sessions, both in and out of class, and get feedback on audio-recordings of those interactions. Research suggests that paraprofessional helpers (without graduate training) can actually be quite effective, and it is gratifying to know that my teaching may be helping others indirectly by creating more helpers in the world. These practical experiences also allow students to evaluate more realistically whether a career in the helping professions is for them.

As a community psychologist, I also hope to encourage students to "give back" in another way: by being active citizens who are empowered to make a difference in their world. Empowerment theory suggests that two important components of psychological empowerment are a critical awareness of relevant (psychological and social) issues, and the skills and confidence needed to begin to confront these issues. Again, I try to encourage the critical awareness component of empowerment through classroom discussion, and I also try to teach and model skills for social change. Although I teach these skills most directly my Community Psychology course, I also try to incorporate them into other classes (e.g., having students in my Adolescence course write a research-based policy recommendation to a policymaker), and to model these skills for students.

One of my main goals for students is to help them *become "lifelong learners."* One potential danger that I see in a student-centered college environment is that of "giving the students too much." This concern has grown over the past several years and is becoming more central to my philosophy of teaching. While it is important for teachers to be organized and enthusiastic, if we are going to teach students to be lifelong learners, we must teach them how to learn independently. This is one reason that I usually don't use PowerPoint in class; I believe that over-reliance on technology can discourage good notetaking in students, robbing them of the opportunity to learn how to organize class material independently. I also use journal articles rather than textbooks whenever possible, as textbooks tend to "pre-digest" material for students, rather than forcing them to engage the material directly. As noted above, to help students engage with primary sources, I often provide them with study/discussion questions for articles beforehand. Over the past few years, I have redesigned several of my courses to rely more heavily on journal articles, and in several courses, I don't use a primary textbook at all. In sum, students need to learn how to learn independently, and ultimately need to take responsibility for their own education, both during college and beyond. Of course, many of these learning skills need to be nurtured over time, and I provide extra support for students in lower-level courses. Finally, I also try to model lifelong learning for my students. For example, I am constantly revising my syllabi, not because they are problematic, but because I want to teach and learn about different concepts.

In sum, my philosophy of education emphasizes both student responsibility and instructor-provided opportunity. Students must be held responsible for independent learning in preparation for classes and other applied experiences. Direct in-class instruction, while often necessary, may not always be the best use of student or teacher time. Rather, students who assume responsibility for learning basic concepts are then better able to take advantage of the myriad of opportunities offered by the college environment. In particular, they can learn to evaluate and integrate these concepts through critical discussion in the classroom, and to apply these concepts in a variety of out-of-class experiences.

Grades and Philosophy of Grading

In all my courses, final grades are determined by multiple means of assessment, including exams, writing assignments, experiential activities, class presentations, and class participation. While the exact requirements differ from course to course, all my courses include at least three components: exams, written assignments, and class participation.

Exams in my courses all include several different types of questions, to try to address the unique response styles of different students. Exams generally consist of some combination of multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions. I further believe that an exam score should estimate a student's overall grasp of assigned course material; therefore, to me, a good exam is one that samples from a more extensive body of information, rather than one that comprehensively covers a limited body of information. For this reason, among others, I usually do not provide study guides to my students before exams (other than making class outlines and study/discussion questions available).

Because I believe that it is essential that students learn effective written communication skills, all of my courses also include written assignments. These assignments vary in order to fit with course goals, and range from formal research papers, to observational reports, to an analysis of a fictional adolescent character, to self-evaluations, to book critiques, to a recommendation to a policymaker.

Finally, in keeping with the strong value I place on class participation, I explicitly include this criterion in final grades. To encourage students to risk speaking in class, these grades are based primarily on **the amount** of contribution to class discussions, rather than the "quality" of contributions. While class participation grades represent only a small percentage of student final grades (and I grade participation generously), this rewards students who consistently come to class prepared to contribute.

My courses have a reputation for being challenging, and I hold students to high standards of learning. I believe in the Carnegie criteria, that students should be preparing for two hours outside of class for every hour in class. While I certainly don't have "quotas" for different grades, I also hold a strong line against grade inflation. If grades don't distinguish among students who have achieved different levels of mastery of course material, they become meaningless. However, I do curve exam scores (adding points to everyone's score if even the top scores in the class fall below a pre-determined level) to ensure that exams are reasonable.