

Philosophy of teaching

In this philosophy statement, I am going to reflect on two deceptively simple questions: a) why do I teach and b) how do I teach. This reflection also aims to expose the values that permeate my teaching and I will contextualise these values within the University of Stellenbosch's¹ strategic vision for teaching and learning.

Why do I teach?

I come from an activist background that has socialized me to think and act critically. I grew up in a home where my parents were both primary school teachers and lived by the New Unity Movement's² slogan "let us live for our children". This meant that my father, particularly, lived out this vision by integrating his role as an educator with that of community service in the small, predominantly poor community of Hawston³ where I received my primary education. I remember him often challenging oppressive structures, such as having to use the "non-white" entrance to services (in Hermanus)⁴ and in school assemblies and parent meetings challenging others to do the same, in order to maintain amongst black people the dignity that they deserved. As a high school student and university student I engaged in protests (often at great cost) for "liberation from gutter education". After training as a psychologist, I worked in various community and human rights organizations for approximately 12 years. During this time I supervised many student psychologists in the NGO context and became aware of some of the consistent difficulties that students face. What struck me was how similar they were to the skill deficits I faced on entering the world of work. The combination of some of these formative experiences, have

¹ Historically white university in Western Cape region of South Africa where I currently teach.

² Political organisation that was popular among middle class "coloured" professionals such as teachers, lawyers etc since the 1950s

³ A small village, historically a fishing village, approximately 120km outside Cape Town, predominantly working class and coloured

⁴ A popular and expensive holiday resort about 130 km outside Cape Town, predominantly white.

motivated me to enter higher education and to extend this activism into this arena. Ironically, I have found my home at Stellenbosch University. In this context, my overt vision in my own teaching, taking into account my own background, is to foster critical thinking. This means that students should question knowledge and always explore alternatives. This is likely to contribute to active citizenship amongst all students, which can enable them to take their place meaningfully (without fear and entitlement) in our new democracy. The teaching process then, necessitates students to acquire many skills, some of which are problem solving skills, and life-long learning skills, a vision that is echoed in the teaching and learning strategy of this university.

Why do I teach psychology?

Psychology has the potential to offer useful insights on human behaviour. The application of psychological theory and concepts can also provide us with skills to work effectively with individuals, groups and communities. Psychology also creates opportunities to encourage change both within personal and social conditions that are restrictive. However, bias is one of the greatest enemies in the learning process and has the potential to restrict learning opportunities for all students. Psychology, as a discipline, has been dominated by white, male, Euro-American values which are still today, transferred uncritically to students who will work predominantly in a very diverse social context. I value inclusivity and anti-bias in teaching psychology and in my teaching hope to reflect a diversity of experience within the classroom. The fact that I am a black women lecturer already concretely brings the concept of “the other” into the classroom and hopefully frees all students, but especially those who are marginalized whether by race, gender, disability or sexual orientation, to express opinions that may be different from mainstream opinion. As a teacher, I not only share knowledge with students, but perhaps more powerfully, also become a gatekeeper. This is a powerful role that I need to be aware of in order to monitor my own possible bias.

I am passionate about student-centred learning and continuously need to think of ways in which to optimize this value in my classroom. As a teacher of psychology, I have some power to influence the course content and the way in which students think about psychology. The reading material, videos, guest lectures, class discussions, projects, assignments and exams that students are exposed to are carefully conceptualized and structured in order to provide them with the maximum learning opportunities. The goals that I set for students are that they should be able to understand psychological theory, and apply it critically within the course (and perhaps even outside the course!).

Learning is a dynamic process and so teaching should reflect this. Students are not empty vessels to be filled with facts. It is a frustrating and challenging process at times when students come into my class having been socialized to believe that they have little prior learning to offer to psychology and want to learn passively. This often makes them detest seminars, for example. Therefore in both undergraduate and postgraduate modules, lectures are but one technique that I use. At undergraduate level a combination of videos, guest speakers, class-discussions and self-study exercises placed on WEB-CT are used, including lectures, to encourage independent and critical thinking. I expect students to actively participate in the learning process and display considerable effort in meeting the course goals. In view of this goal, I provide students with an extensive reading list but also emphasise essential reading to facilitate a range of interests, ability groups and learning styles in the class.

How do I teach, challenge, motivate and mentor students?

This is a different process at under- and postgraduate levels as one largely works with undergraduate students at a group level (mostly) and has the privilege of engaging with postgraduate students on an individual level. Yet the motivating process for under- and postgraduate levels is not very different. I attempt to illustrate theoretical concepts with student experiences and I am actively trying to

encourage students to read the newspapers by illustrating theoretical concepts with everyday news events. While I also illustrate theory (and critiques of theory) with case histories of the many clients I have worked with, guest lecturers are also routinely engaged in teaching. This provides added information. I must admit that I do have covert goals when I think of guest lecturers as I try to incorporate a diverse group of guest speakers, to try and challenge dominant views about who a competent psychologist is, what psychologists do, what white and black and male and female psychologists do. It is very common within psychology for students, colleagues and practising psychologists to believe that my extended vision of the activist role in psychology (i.e. “community psychology”) is not real psychology like traditional therapeutic interventions and that it is really a lesser form of psychology, equivalent to social work. Perceptions about community psychology are also racialised, as one of my Masters research students’ work this year, has again suggested that students think that community psychology is for poor black people and the psychologists who deliver these services are middle class black women. These views need to be challenged in concrete ways. Prof. Melvyn Freeman (his comments on the 348 course are enclosed with other referee reports in section 9 of the portfolio) who is an extraordinary professor with an impressive CV, that includes being a consultant to the World Health Organisation’s mental health programme and the HSRC programme on HIV/AIDS and health and who also is a white male psychologist, has regularly delivered lectures to our third year class on the role of the psychologist in dealing with psychosocial issues such as AIDS. The fact that a white man, who has excelled in his field, talks about community interventions, I know, comes as a surprise to many students and this subliminal message is important to convey. By the same token, I could easily be seen as an “exceptional black” and therefore not representative of the potential of other black women when students are perhaps surprised by my fairly extensive subject and general knowledge. I therefore also think it crucial to expose students to other competent black women in their respective fields. We have for example, invited Rene Minnies, a social

worker, who runs the public education programme at Cape Mental Health⁵ to speak about how psychosocial rehabilitation is experienced in practice. In short, the course content is important but the process by which we convey it, and the modeling that accompanies it, is perhaps equally important in the teaching process. I have just delivered a paper on this very topic of “teaching as intervention” at the September national psychology congress in Cape Town where I discussed the concept of socializing students into a culture of community psychology via teaching practice. I illustrated this concept by means of a poster project that I did with Honours and BPsych students this year. The paper was very well received. Some colleagues at the Universities of Zululand and Kwa-Zulu Natal indicated that they would like to implement a similar methodology with their Honours students and Fiona Chisholm from Juta Publishers approached me with regard to a textbook for teaching undergraduate community psychology. Video material, (such as the video “ a Class Divided” in the section on race and mental health and “Little Angels” from BBC TV in the section on Prevention and intervention) is routinely used in the 348 module on the South African Mental Health context. The inclusion of many types of teaching techniques can accommodate many different learning styles within the context of large classes such as those in 348. Evaluation has also been a challenge. The question that usually arises is “How can I as a teacher evaluate meaningfully and know that I have achieved the aims of my course?”. Last week an anxious student approached me the day before an exam and when I told her to relax, she said that everybody is anxious about the exam because they have to think! I met this response with ambivalence. I was elated as this meant that maybe I had succeeded in my goal to foster critical thinking but I was also despondent and questioned what needs to be done in a system that socializes students not to think.

⁵ NGO that works with intellectual and psychiatric disability issues.

The poster project that I did with BPsych/Honours students in 2005 showed me again that students will be willing to work incredibly hard if they have some measure of fun and recognition. The quality of the posters was of a high standard as I had told them that we are going to display their posters in the department. This also created an opportunity for psycho-education about community psychology among other students and colleagues. The poster project was very well received in the department. How else do I motivate students? I expect them to expect more of themselves by setting high standards for myself in the classroom; by the way in which I prepare my module outlines and goals, reading lists, lectures, level of assignment and exam questions, by the knowledge gained from recent conferences that I share with them, students know that I expect only their best. After an exam, I asked one of my BPsych students how it went, and I was amazed when he blushed and communicated embarrassment about thinking that he was not going to do well!

In a social context where education has tended to be paternalistic, I have experienced students as initially surprised to be treated as adults and not children but subsequently strive to do their best as they feel empowered by lecturers engaging with them as adults and yet maintaining expectations about quality of work. They experience what professionalism as a value means in a meaningful relationship with a supportive lecturer. The values of professionalism, a high standard of work, student-centred learning and service delivery has culminated in a very successful Open Day, organized entirely by BPsych⁶ final year students.

Mentoring

I have to comment on the process of applying for this award. I did not deem myself good enough to be called an “excellent teacher” until some of my colleagues, Prof. Leslie Swartz and Dr. Mario Smith actively encouraged me to

⁶ A four year directed degree which leads to registration as a counselor with the South African Professional Board for Psychology.

do so. Despite my feeling fairly empowered, the reality is that I would not have applied if I was not encouraged to do so. I think this is precisely what I do with students. I encourage them, and particularly disadvantaged students, to begin to believe that they are good enough. In this way I have mentored one of my previous Honours students (a black woman) to apply for a scholarship to Leeds University where she is currently completing a Masters degree. I also spend much time guiding talented, young women and particularly black female students who are first generation graduates and who do not have the advantage of the support that emanates from a family heritage of tertiary education, to take their rightful place in a system that has for far too long discredited their talent, intellect and ability. I have since 2005 taken black women students into the masters research programme, as their supervisor, and have assisted them in successfully securing NRF⁷ funding and have taken both of them to the national psychological society conference where their work was well received. One of my students also had the opportunity to lecture third year students, only the second black woman in the history of our department to have done this.

By reflecting on my personal philosophy of teaching it appears to be in perfect synergy with the expressed strategy of teaching and learning at the University of Stellenbosch. My teaching philosophy actively embodies the ideals of quality teaching (I'm still running from gutter education⁸), catering for the needs of South Africa, instructing in knowledge specific and generic skills, innovative facilitation of learning and teaching and bringing about a demographically more representative body of excellent students. In the near future I will need to focus more decidedly on synergy between teaching, research and service delivery. While this is reflected in some of my conference presentations on teaching as an intervention, the challenge to me is to be able to synergise these three aspects on a more consistent basis. It is in this endeavour that I am likely to use the funding should I receive this award.

⁷ National research funding organisation which provides funding to academic staff/faculty and students

⁸ A perjorative term that was used to describe education of a poor quality usually made available to blacks during apartheid.

When I think of the words of Ghandi who said: “we need to be the change that we would like to see in the world”, my philosophy of teaching necessarily paraphrases his words to read “ we need to teach the change that we would like to see in the world”.