

Teaching Philosophy
Elaine S. Barry, Applicant for University Undergraduate Teaching Award

“Psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality” (James, 1899, p. 3).

Developmental science has demonstrated that we learn better from people we feel connected to. As a developmentalist, I try to apply James’ idea of an “intermediary inventive mind” to make connections with students, through which I practice the art of teaching the science of human development and psychology. Both teaching and learning are developmental processes, constantly influencing and changing each other, and my ideas about the teaching and learning processes have been greatly shaped by my point of view as a developmentalist. Successful teaching and learning occur at those points where the teacher’s and learners’ interests, understanding, and experiences intersect.

My job is to create opportunities for these variables to intersect. The context for these opportunities includes my classroom, office hours, through advising, in student activities, through emails or phone calls, or anywhere I might engage with students. These opportunities occurs in the everyday interactions I have with students, which often begin in the classroom. The courses I regularly teach are freshman-level general education courses (in HDFS and Psychology) and senior-level seminar courses. I am incredibly lucky to be able to see students’ development literally from the time they enter college until their graduation. Whether I am using traditional lecture, seminar-type discussions (often about journal article readings), small group work (such as analyzing a recent newspaper article for application to course concepts), student presentations, or hands-on “lab” activities (such as having students build neurons out of play-dough to learn neuronal structure), I strive to develop connection and maintain student interest, motivation, and curiosity.

Learning opportunities are designed to meet my teaching goals: 1) help students learn how to apply the material in real-life situations (in assignments, group work, and tests), and 2) help students learn how to ask good questions, so they will never stop learning (in assignments, papers, projects, and group work). I remind students that asking questions is much more important than just answering them, because an answer to a question is just the beginning of more questions in our search for knowledge.

I make connections with students in the way I approach my courses and my interactions with them. My course policies are firm (for ex., no late assignments, for late papers, 10% penalty per day) but have built-in flexibility (for ex. using 7 of the highest 10 assignment grades). By firmly setting the ground rules and policies, clearly articulating them, and then holding myself and students to them, I am consistently reliable to students. Being someone who can be relied on to do as she said is one of the easiest ways to begin building the connection with students. Similarly, I am consistent in my availability to students and in my responsiveness to them.

At Fayette, our “large” classrooms have almost 40 students, and making connections is easier than when I taught in classrooms of over 200 students. My approach remains the same, however – setting the conditions where students know that they matter to me. I believe that learning their names, getting to know them as individuals, and generally making them feel comfortable asking questions and participating in class enhances their motivation to learn. Weekly group work in all my classes enhances the connection as I get to know students as individuals while monitoring group problem-solving and group interactions. Students who do not speak up in class feel much more comfortable speaking to me in their small group, which I encourage.

Sometimes I am unsure of the connection until later. For example, while I have a reputation as a “hard” grader, I always point out what students have done well in addition to what they need to work on. I make my expectations known, and I provide students with the tools they need to meet those expectations. For example, one time a senior student wrote a particularly good essay for a take-home Final question. I can’t recall exactly what feedback I wrote, but she confessed to me after she graduated that she hung that page on her refrigerator and it was a factor in her gaining the confidence to apply to graduate school. These connections are why I choose to teach.