

Michael J. Bernstein Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Social psychology examines how the situations in which a person finds themselves affects their behavior, often more so than does personality. My particular areas of scholarship focus on the importance of belonging to groups and how people react when belonging is threatened (e.g., when people feel excluded). It is perhaps not surprising then that, as a social scientist, I think about the classroom as a place where I can control the situation in which students find themselves in order to help them succeed. That success occurs not only in the class but beyond; by creating the right situations for success in my class, I can impact their overall educational outlook. I do this by changing the structure of educational spaces so that everyone (1) feels they belong, (2) takes responsibility for their success, and (3) understands my pedagogical approach.

Students vary in the extent to which they feel they belong in a classroom. First generation college students, for example, often don't feel like they belong in college. Ethnic minorities who are stereotyped (even without basis in reality) as being intellectually weak (e.g., Blacks, LatinX) often feel as though others see them as ill-equipped to handle the intellectual challenges of college. Women in STEM may experience concerns over whether or not they have what it takes to perform well. Many students simply don't feel they belong, and this relates to decreased performance in classes, reduced retention within majors and college generally, and worse outcomes across many other academic areas. I talk to students early and often about these stereotypes and how many students may feel like they don't belong. I explain to them the stereotypes are not true and that every single person in the room is supposed to be there – they belong here. I casually include examples of women and non-white individuals who engage in important scholarship in the field, because that contributes to feeling like they belong. I also get to know my students as individuals; students know I want to know about who they are as people, what facilitates their learning, and what “makes them tick.” They are not simply functionaries. They are not students I simply teach at or talk to. They are why I am here and this itself is a way I create a sense of belonging. At the same time, I do not sugar-coat the class; I describe that they should expect a challenge and that not everyone succeeds, but I make it explicitly clear that the predictor of their success is about them as people (and their personal situations) and not about the groups to which they are a part. I make it explicit because I don't want to be too subtle. I make it explicit because I want to show them how much I care about this issue because that too should make them feel more belonging in the classroom.

Students feeling they belong also contributes to their feeling of having the capacity for success. **I diligently work to make clear how students can succeed and that it is their responsibility to do so.** On the first day of class, I talk about the responsibilities that students and I have for class success. Of all the things I have to do (e.g., treat everyone fairly; post grades quickly; give feedback to help iterative assignments), they have but one responsibility. It isn't to work hard. It isn't to attend regularly. It isn't to come to me for help. It's to take responsibility for their success. I walk students through the things they can do to succeed in the class and how important it is to me that they know how to succeed. I also acknowledge that, in the end, it is their responsibility to decide what to do; students have many obligations beyond academic pursuits (e.g., children, parents and family obligations, work) and sometimes they have to make decisions about how to direct time and energy. I convey to students my desire is for everyone to succeed. I tell them about my homeworks, that they are meant to prepare students for exams and to help students get a deeper understanding of important educational topics. I reiterate the importance of attendance and of studying regularly and in small increments; I explain to students that when a student performs poorly on an exam and says “they studied for hours,” I start from the assumption that they are 100% telling the truth; they may have studied for hours but they may not have studied correctly. My lectures in my lower level classes are all online (even for fully face-to-face classes) because I want them to have access to my lectures always. I put up numerous sources for extra help for the same reason. I walk them through how to succeed and I put the onus on them because they need to perceive they have control, something many students feel they lack both in class and in their lives more generally.

Finally, and as a common thread throughout my teaching, **I explain my pedagogical strategies.** Sometimes faculty members make decisions that make a lot of sense to them and little sense to students. Students often don't understand why we do the things we do, but they certainly make assumptions, and there is huge value in avoiding their making the wrong assumptions. By explaining to students why I make the decisions I do, it helps them feel that I am actively thinking about the importance of their learning and can sometimes help them feel better about the class itself. For example, in my Introduction to Psychological Statistics class, they have five in-class exams and five take-home exams and the final exams are cumulative. Students are horrified by this information on syllabus day, but when I explain why I do this, things change (e.g., ten exams means no single exam makes or breaks students' grades; it means students can develop expertise in each section of the class; it means that when the cumulative finals come, they are better prepared). Without explanation, students might simply make the easy attribution that I am an insensitive professor who doesn't realize how much work 10 exams is. In another vein, in my upper level courses, students prepare 300-word research proposals each week. These papers include an intro, hypothesis, method, anticipated analysis and results, and discussion. Students often wonder why they have to write so much or why the assignment is limited to only 300 words (many students are frustrated they can't write more). By explaining my rationale (e.g., iterative writing is how we learn; scientific writing is about being concise), students and I are at least then debating on the same grounds. By explaining it, they understand why I do this, that I care enough about their perspective to explain it to them, and that I want them to succeed and do what I can to create situations for them to do so.

I approach the classroom as a place where my decisions and actions have huge impacts on student outcomes. For everything I do, I want students to know why I am doing it, that they can indeed succeed, and that they indeed belong. By ensuring students and I see the classroom similarly, I can not only facilitate success in my class but across college.