

SAMPLE TEACHING STATEMENT

My goal in teaching is to foster the acquisition of a base of concepts and learning skills to facilitate further learning and thinking. In all of my courses I guide students in the evaluation of evidence, critical thinking, argument development, verbal and written expression, and the application of general principles to novel settings. These competencies will equip students for a broad range of demands in future academic and occupational settings. Of course, I also expect my students to attain a high level of scholarship in specific content areas, especially in graduate courses in which course content is directly relevant to students' careers. To promote the development of general thinking and learning skills, as well as facilitate an understanding of course content, all of my courses are structured around three common themes: an emphasis on psychological research, the development of writing skills and the generation of enthusiasm for scientific inquiry.

Exposure to research literature is an integral part of my course plans, in part because comprehension of course material is enhanced by an understanding of the methods used to discover that information. Moreover, an emphasis on the discovery of knowledge fosters an appreciation of research design and methodology, and more generally, of the importance of critical evaluation. These skills make students thoughtful consumers of scientific ideas presented in both academic and popular media sources. As I indicate in my research statement, I have investigated this issue in a collaborative research project on science learning in undergraduate students. To familiarize students with research, my lectures always cover the methodology by which principles are discovered. I also introduce research by including primary sources in the required course reading material, and organizing occasional in-class activities around one or two such sources. For instance, in my undergraduate *Cognitive Development* course, we spend one class period reading, summarizing and critiquing an empirical article published in *Nature* on numerical understanding in human infants. Similarly, in my undergraduate *Memory and Testimony in Children* class, I introduce students to the scientific controversy over the relation between stress and memory by assigning half of the students an empirical paper suggesting a positive relation between stress and memory, and assigning the other half an article suggesting a negative association. During the next class period, students are organized into small groups and asked to explain their assigned articles to each other, analyze differences in methodology and results, explain the discrepancies between the two investigations, and come up with a feasible model of the relation between stress and memory. These sorts of activities not only provide students with exposure to the empirical literature in developmental and cognitive psychology, but promote the development of skills in critical thinking and argument development. Finally, I also provide first-hand research experience through frequent in-class demonstrations and assignments outside the classroom. Indeed, in my course *Memory and Testimony in Children*, almost every class period includes one or two simple "memory experiments" exploring topics in classical and modern models of memory.

Writing proficiency is a critical component of a university education, and all of my courses (even my *Child Psychology* class, which has well over 400 students) involve writing assignments and a variety of examination question types. In *Child Psychology*, I typically assign two to four brief "application papers," in response to a question related to the course material (e.g., after reading a section in the text about premature infants, indicate what you might tell a close cousin who had a baby two months prematurely about her child's chances for normal development). These papers are designed to prompt students to apply course material to settings outside the class, and in doing so reinforce important concepts. Students in my undergraduate *Cognitive Development* and *Memory and Testimony* classes, as well as those in my graduate courses, write more extensive research papers. But not all of my students arrive in my classroom equipped with excellent writing skills, so rather than using writing solely as a form of evaluation, I teach students the process of writing. With all writing assignments, I encourage students to take advantage of the writing centers on campus and to submit rough drafts so that I can provide constructive feedback, and

I sometimes give students the opportunity to rewrite their “final” papers for additional credit. In addition to these more formal projects, I use briefer in-class writing assignments to help students synthesize and critically evaluate information. For instance, to prepare my *Cognitive Development* students for a discussion of several controversial theories of intelligence, I ask them to spend a few minutes writing about their own “definitions” of intelligence. Similarly, following a discussion of the role of experience in brain development, I asked students to write a response to a comment about whether the field of Psychology will ever be reducible to biology alone.

My courses are also designed to generate enthusiasm for science and the process of scientific inquiry. Meeting this objective is particularly complicated in my undergraduate and graduate *Cognitive Development* courses and my graduate *History and Systems of Psychology: Developmental Theory* course, which have been service courses taken primarily by students from outside the discipline to fulfill a curriculum requirement. The challenge is to stimulate curiosity, as well as learning, by linking material to students’ existing knowledge and experience. My approach is informed by research on memory and cognition (including some of my own research), which shows that memory is enhanced when to-be-remembered information is familiar and meaningful. I always supplement lectures with structured discussions, demonstrations, or cooperative learning activities that encourage students to think actively about the material and relate to it personally and practically. For example, in my undergraduate *Child Psychology* and *Cognitive Development* courses, I frequently use demonstrations with real children (live and videotaped) to illustrate principles of development and the methodology that documents them. In my undergraduate classes, I also assign brief writing assignments to connect information presented in class to students’ intuitive knowledge. For instance, students in *Memory and Testimony and Children* write a brief essay on their earliest memory and analyze the characteristics of the remembered event. They then shared their analyses during a class discussion on “infantile amnesia” and the emergence of autobiographical memory. Assignments in my graduate courses are designed to be “useful” and to relate the material to students work in their own disciplines. In my graduate course, *History and Systems of Psychology: Developmental Theory*, students choose a content area related to Developmental Psychology and analyze either the current or historical theoretical approaches to that content area. For their final project in my seminar on *Memory Development* (Psychology 800), students write a paper describing a mock empirical study on an issue in memory development and present the paper at a memory development “conference” on one of the last two days of class. This assignment involves reviewing the literature in an area of the student’s choice in order to develop a hypothesis, describing the method of an empirical study designed to test the hypothesis, “creating” results that bear on the hypothesis, and discussing the implications of the findings.

I have also pursued extensive informal teaching at KU in the context of independent study and practicum courses. I have supervised seven graduate students in the research enterprise, and each semester I supervise 4 to 10 undergraduate students in *Psychology Independent Study* (PSYC 480) or *Practicum in Research on Human Development* (HDFL 689). For both of these courses, I arrange research and scholarly activities to teach students about research design, experimental procedures, and statistical techniques. I also assign book chapters and journal articles on memory development throughout the semester, and organize weekly or bimonthly meetings in which we discuss this literature, as well as recent research activities. These additional responsibilities ensure that being a member of my research team is an educational experience, and help to get students “invested” in the work we are doing.

The teaching techniques I use to promote students’ understanding of the research literature, writing proficiency, and general enthusiasm for scientific inquiry also provide data that enable me to evaluate student learning and make adaptive changes to my course plans and instructional methods. In-class discussions with students not only prompt students to think critically and relate to the course material, but provide me with “on-line” data about the development of these general thinking skills and their appreciation of important course concepts. In response to this immediate feedback, I may either move

through the material more rapidly or revisit particularly difficult points, and occasionally may modify my plans for the next class. These discussions form the backbone of class sessions in my graduate courses, but are also an important component of my undergraduate courses, even my very large *Child Psychology* class. Indeed, to promote discussion in *Child Psychology* I give students the opportunity to earn extra credit points for offering comments or questions during class and for posting them on a Blackboard discussion forum. I typically begin the following class period by addressing some of the common themes that emerged in this student dialogue. Of course, I cannot realistically count on *all* students to participate in *all* class discussions, so I rely on my brief in-class writing assignments (e.g., following a unit on experience and brain development comment on whether the field of psychology will ever be reducible to biology alone) for more systematic assessments of how well my students are meeting course goals. These quick measures of student learning have been especially useful in planning the activities for the following class period.

Student performance on formal writing assignments and examinations also provides benchmarks for examining student progress, both within and across semesters. For instance, because one of my major goals is to teach students how to apply general principles to novel settings, many of my examination questions ask them to apply concepts learned in class to new contexts. In some of my undergraduate classes, however, I found that many students had difficulty with the applied questions. Thus, I now teach students how to generalize their knowledge through in-class activities designed to explicitly model this type of thinking, and I have subsequently observed dramatic improvement in student performance on applied questions. My reliance on rubrics for grading papers, essays and other formal writing assignments also enables me, as well as my students, to quickly identify areas in which they are excelling or having difficulty. For example, in my first two semesters of teaching the undergraduate-level *Cognitive Development* course, I noticed that many students had trouble selecting and locating relevant empirical articles from scholarly sources for their research papers. As a result, I have made learning about library research an explicit goal of this course. Each semester I invite a librarian to visit the class and instruct students on using search databases to locate papers in scholarly journals, and I have broken the research paper into two components. The first assignment is to find articles relevant to one of several topics in cognitive development and students are graded on the relevance and appropriateness of the sources they choose. Once their articles have been approved, they then write an analysis of the research in the context of a mock advice column for a parents' magazine. The quality of the papers students produce has increased substantially following these modifications.

In addition to making changes in response to student progress towards course goals and student feedback, I continually refine my teaching techniques by attending workshops offered by the Center for Teaching Excellence and seeking informal consultation with experienced colleagues. As a result, I feel I am improving and evolving as a teacher. Even after several years on the KU faculty, I think it is important that I look for additional ways to grow as an instructor and to prevent my teaching from getting stale. I will continue to look for opportunities to create new courses, and to fine-tune and update my current courses by incorporating innovative teaching techniques and presenting students the most up-to-date research and theories, as well as historically important work, in each area.