

How do you get someone to care about something?

My commitment to teaching comes from the same place as my interest in psychology: a fascination with how we create internal representations of the external world. How does one translate a sensory experience into an abstract concept that gains meaning from nothing but neuronal firing? My research has taught me that individual motivations impact every aspect of this process – the internal representations we form are a direct reflection of what we care about. When it comes to teaching, we can't reach inside our students' heads and tinker with their synapses, so it might be accurate to boldly proclaim that no one has ever taught anyone anything. Rather, the role of an instructor is to create circumstances in which students are able and motivated to teach themselves, to build their own internal representations.

My goals as a teacher can be summarized by the following three maxims: **Build confidence; Draw external connections; Be a person.** I've come to form these goals through my many and varied experiences as an instructor: I developed an original undergraduate seminar for which I am serving as the instructor of record this fall; I have TAed for six courses, three of which required me to lead weekly lab sections; I have mentored seven undergraduate research assistants, two of whom completed senior honors theses, and another two of whom participated in a summer research program that I helped create; and I have spent countless hours doing science outreach for students of all ages, including three years as an instructor and curriculum developer for a high school neuroscience program. Each time I taught, I gained a better understanding from my students of what they need to feel confident, connected, and comfortable.

Build confidence

Students are most motivated when they feel confident in their abilities. Confidence is built by providing students with a baseline understanding of material from which they can “hang” additional content, and allowing them to collaborate with others to explore that additional content. I have employed this strategy as a section leader in the three research methods classes I've TAed for, where there is often a lot of material that students have never encountered before. For example, in a lesson about how to operationalize variables, I first provide students with a guiding framework: every psychological variable exists as both an abstract construct and a concrete measurement. Self-esteem is a construct, while the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale is a measurement. Popularity is a construct, while number of reported friends is a measurement. And so on. I enhance these examples with PowerPoint schematics to demonstrate the relationship between ideas and measurements.

Once I've provided students with this base, I next give them the opportunity to explore further with others. In small groups, they fill out a “collaborative Google document” – a pandemic-era teaching strategies that has proven useful back in the classroom – with a series of research questions listed. For each question, they are expected to extract an X and Y variable, come up with two ways of operationalizing each one, and reflect on whether and why these operationalizations would elicit different results. The benefits of this activity are manifold: It's an opportunity to practice a skill they'll be implicitly expected to do for the class's final independent research project; they are exposed to the ideas of other students, who may think differently from them; and they gain experience critiquing the scientific process and witnessing the complexities of research design. I have found that this approach – a rigid base followed by more free-form collaboration – is a highly effective way to cover a lot of material quickly without sacrificing meaningful engagement. Most importantly, this approach *motivates* students: it provides them with a semantic map to guide their learning, and a flexible playing field to build up their own internal representations in collaboration with others.

Draw external connections

I strive to make students' classwork connected to the outside world, and therefore useful once the class is completed. This goal is particularly evident in the midterm and final assignments for a new undergraduate seminar that I created and am teaching in Fall 2024 entitled "Psychology and the Internet." The midterm assignment asks each student to create a coding tutorial, with coding teaching tools such as R Markdown or Jupyter Notebooks, about how to work with one software package that can be used to access digital data (Reddit posts, news articles, Wikipedia pages, etc.). These tutorials will be saved on our class website, meaning that students will have a ready-made resource to help them conduct research with online data, should they wish to do so in the future. The final assignment operates under this same philosophy: students are asked to write an op-ed arguing for a new internet regulation or policy, informed by psychology research. The assignment is structured so that students can actually try to get their pieces published: as part of the assignment, they need to write a pitch email, and the op-ed has to be written according to the style of a specific publication of their choosing.

I've employed this philosophy in other classes as well, even when I have less control over the structure of the course. For example, I introduced R programming lessons into the research methods classes I TAed for. Since programming in R is now considered an essential component of any PhD program, I wanted to make sure that the course provided practical training for students who wished to pursue a career in science research. Similarly, I introduced Python programming lessons into the high school neuroscience program I taught, along with a lesson on neuroethics. Both of these additions to the curriculum were intended to open up the walls of the classroom, and to encourage students to see that what they were learning was applicable and useful in other contexts. By directly linking classwork to the real world, I provide further motivation for a student's own learning process.

Be a person

I've spent this teaching statement talking about what I do *as a teacher*. But at the end of the day, I'm also me, Ben. When I teach, I bring my whole self into the class, warts and all. I recognize that this goal is not feasible or even desirable for everyone, but it works for me. I'm excitable, and anxious, and sometimes (I hope) a little bit funny. I find that by bringing these parts of me into the class, it creates a more relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. By bringing my whole self into the classroom, I'm signaling to other students that they can do so too, if they wish. Being myself also allows me to demonstrate empathy and honesty towards my students. When I introduce a topic, such as programming, that I can sense students are apprehensive about, I bring in my own difficulties learning these topics to demonstrate that they're not alone, that it's normal to struggle or be confused.

Real people treat others with warmth and compassion. When I'm a real person in the classroom, and not just an instructor, I treat my students with warmth and compassion as well. In one section of my research methods course, there was a serious interpersonal conflict amongst members of a project group. Two of the group members, who felt they were being bullied by the third, felt comfortable coming to me and asking for help. Together, we worked through the conflict, and all three students were able to succeed in the course. In terms of deadlines and attendance, I emphasize clear communication with me ahead of time, rather than adhering to hard and fast rules that fail to consider students' personal lives. Treating my students with compassion also allows me to form deeper connections with them, which allows them to expand their academic network. I've written numerous recommendation letters for my students, in addition to the ones I've written for research assistants whom I've mentored. When students feel comfortable and welcome, it frees up their mind to focus on learning. When students feel that our classroom is an inclusive environment, they will be motivated to be a part of it.

As an instructor, I can't force anyone to understand anything. All I can do is foster an environment where students are motivated to learn, where students are interested in building new representations, where students are excited to quite literally expand their minds. When students have a firm conceptual base, they will be motivated to build on it. When students are given the opportunity to work with their peers, they will be motivated to try out different perspectives and ways of learning. When students feel that their hard work can benefit them after the class is over, they will be motivated to set themselves up for success. When students feel like they're being taught by someone who is a real person, with a real identity and emotions, they will be motivated to be a part of our classroom. I can't *make* my students learn anything; all I can do is make them want to try.