

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 – and the primary ways I try to motivate students – can be summarized by the following three maxims: **Draw external connections; Build confidence; Be a person.** I've come to form these goals through my many experiences as an instructor: I've developed two courses from scratch: an undergraduate psychology research methods course focused on data science and justice, and a seminar on psychology and the internet for juniors and seniors. As a graduate student, I TAed for six courses, three of which required me to lead weekly lab sections; I have mentored over ten undergraduate research assistants, many of whom are my former students: two completed senior honors theses with me, and another two participated in a summer research program that I helped create. Finally, 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 connected, confident, and cared-for.

Draw external connections

One of the best ways to motivate students is to make coursework relevant to their lives outside the classroom. This goal works in two directions: I show students how what we're learning is useful after our course is complete, while also encouraging them to bring their own interests and life experiences into class assignments and discussions. This fall, I am teaching (for the second time) an original psychology research methods course entitled "Data Science, Justice, and Social Change." In this course, students learn how they can use research methods concepts and psychological theory to analyze and interpret real-world, administrative datasets for the purposes of creating a more just society. In a way, the very purpose of this course is to show students how psychological theory and research methods can impact the "real world," i.e. policy and community advocacy efforts. I bring in guest speakers, such as journalists and policy-makers, who apply the logic of our course in their jobs to show students how important their learning is, and to give them opportunities to form professional connections that may lead to internships or jobs. In addition, learning to code is a significant component of this course; making students' work useful for further learning is especially important for coding skills, which students often find daunting but are an increasingly essential component of any PhD program. I structure my coding teaching materials as a series of stand-alone coding tutorials so that students can use them for further learning after the course ends, if they wish.

I also draw external connections in my courses by designing assignments in such a way that there is ample opportunity for students to bring their own interests and experiences into the class. The course that I designed and taught in my final year of graduate school was entitled "Psychology and the Internet;" its focus was human behavior in online spaces, a topic that nearly every student is able to relate to. Of all of my teaching experiences, this course stood out for the depth of student engagement and the richness of in-class discussions. Quite simply, I could *feel*, every week, how excited students were to talk about a topic that had such pertinent applications to their daily lives (and I myself learned

quite a bit from them about the nefariousness of the TikTok algorithm). I encouraged students' excitement by designing assignments to be flexible enough that they could complete them through the lens of their own interests. For example, I instructed students to make connections between the readings and their own personal experiences when filling out a weekly reading log. (Asking students to bring in personal experiences has the added benefit of encouraging authenticity and discouraging copying and pasting from AI.) Similarly, their midterm and final assignments provided basic structure – design a coding tutorial and write an op-ed, respectively – but the topic of focus could be filled in with the data sources and real-world phenomena that students found the most compelling. (The final research project for my research methods class was structured similarly.) In all of these examples, the intention is to open up the walls of the classroom, to encourage students to see that what they are learning is 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.

Build confidence

Another way to motivate students is to make them 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. This strategy has proven especially important in the research methods courses I've taught and 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 strategy 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.

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. By bringing my whole self into the classroom, I'm signaling to other students that they can do so too, if they wish. Real people also treat others with compassion and respect. When I'm a real person in the classroom, and not just an instructor, I treat my students with compassion and respect as well. In a class I TAed for, there was an 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. Treating my students with compassion also allows me to form deeper connections with them, which allows them to expand their academic network and provides them with additional opportunities, such as working with me as a research assistant.

The added benefit of being a real person who treats others with respect is that you can ask for their respect in return. I've had several instances in my classes where I was pretty sure I had caught a student using AI to complete their reading log. When I met with each of them and candidly explained why their use of AI was disrespectful to their classmates and to me, they admitted to their dishonesty and were open to discussing how to avoid improperly using it in the future. After these meetings, students' reading logs became dramatically more authentic and interesting, and they became much better at communicating with me about late assignments. These examples demonstrate that real people owe things to each other. When students are made to feel comfortable and welcome by their instructor, it frees up their mind to focus on learning. When students feel that our classroom is an inclusive environment, they are more 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 feel that their hard work intersects with their interests and can benefit them after the class is over, they will be motivated to set themselves up for success. When students are given the opportunity to build on a firm conceptual base with their peers, they will be motivated to try out different perspectives and ways of learning. 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.