This portfolio was first prepared in a workshop at the University of Virginia Teaching Resource Center (www.trc.virginia.edu). I am grateful for their assistance.
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Philosophy of Teaching

“Olivia was the best teacher I have had here at <name of school>: despite her being American, her pronunciation was very accessible, and the classes were interesting, which is difficult to manage in a vacation course [4 hrs/day, 4 days/week], when classes could become monotonous. Despite having received the lowest grade of my life (55%) in this class, I can say that it is the class in which I learned the most English.”
- ESL student, Brazil

My primary goal as a teacher is to stretch my students: to challenge them with high standards, tempt them with fascinating material, and support them as they reach out. I have taught in multiple subject areas, such as English as a Second Language, and now psychology, to students ranging from middle-school to college. In all cases, I have exercised unfailing honesty with students: I don’t placate them with high grades, but I’m willing to work with them toward improvement. I have taught in environments where administrators feared students would leave the school if they ever received a failing grade. However, both my supervisors and students have consistently reacted positively to my high bar (see Appendix). Amazingly, some students have even expressed gratitude despite low grades, and students that I have failed in courses have sought to repeat the course with me, instead of another teacher. I’ve thus had the great pleasure of watching students grow farther in a semester than they ever believed possible, and of sharing with them this joy of success.

I hope students react positively to my high demands because they trust me: trust that I am actually committed to educating them, and am dedicated to helping them reach their goals (within and beyond my course). I have chosen each subject I teach because I believe it to be important and fascinating, and I work hard to communicate this to students. They respond with engagement to my conviction I am introducing them to something amazing, and they often cite my enthusiasm in evaluations (see Appendix). I have run into several former students from introductory psychology courses who now work in laboratories, and I find it particularly rewarding to see them “hooked” on the field. I have also taught courses with obvious and immediate practical value, such as ESL. I carefully design activities for these students to move beyond classroom drills, to remind them of the real-world demands they are training to meet. Importantly, though, I do not merely demand effort of students: I walk with them myself, and go to great lengths to make myself available. I talk with students after class, provide detailed feedback on their work, and offer extra assistance to all those who want it. It is important to me that my students know I care about them, and am committed to their success.

This level of commitment to teaching, of course, requires considerable effort, flexibility, and creativity on my part. As anyone who has ever taught knows, simply explaining information or techniques in the way that first made sense to us is rarely helpful for all students. Rather, we must step back and examine the material from different perspectives, seeking different structure within it and different angles from which to approach it, then try those out with students. For me, this has sometimes required reinventing grammar for ESL students who never learned proper grammar in their native language. Other times, it has meant reinterpreting cutting-edge research in cognitive psychology, in order to create an accessible course for gifted middle-schoolers (see Appendix). In all cases, I find that one of the greatest joys of teaching comes when these efforts to reinterpret familiar material allow us to watch students suddenly reach their “Aha!” moment, while at the same time we ourselves come to appreciate entirely new facets of our subject.

I set a high standard for students, and a high standard for myself. We stride towards this together: with patience, good humor, passion and flexibility. It’s been a wonderful journey thus far.
Responsibilities Held

“This was one of the best discussion classes I’ve had in a good while. The students were thoroughly engaged, and the instructor was warm and thought-provoking. She was neither overly aggressive, leading the conversation, nor was she overly passive, saying little and allowing gaps of silence during the class (a phenomenon rather uncomfortable and common in other discussion sections). I highly recommend her as an instructor.”

-UVA undergraduate, Psychology

Over the past seven years, I have served in a variety of teaching roles. These range from leading psychology discussion sections at the University of Virginia, and designing summer courses for gifted middle-schoolers, to teaching ESL and training teachers in Brazil. Each of these contexts demanded considerably different skills. However, my basic aims and strategies were always the same: high expectations, dynamic classes, and dedication to students.

Psychology Teaching Assistant, University of Virginia

I have served as a TA in the psychology department for four semesters, in both introductory statistics and child development courses. Sometimes I played a supporting role: grading papers and writing exams for the 250-student lecture course in child development (cognitive, physical, and social), or leading review sessions for this and the 140-student statistics course. In 2005, I taught my own discussion sections for child psychology. My three classes had 20 students each, and met weekly as a supplement to the lecture (not a review), with independent readings and assignments. The professor set the readings, but each TA structured her own activities and policies (see Syllabus). I was the only developmental psychologist among the five TAs, so I also served as unofficial head TA: organizing meetings to standardize grading and discuss requirements for the final project (see Rubric).

Summer Enrichment Program, University of Virginia

I designed and taught two courses at this intensive program for gifted middle and high school students. Courses met daily for two weeks, in three consecutive sessions each year. In 2005, I taught a main course, with 3-hour classes, homework, and a final project. Called “Psychology: Breakdown of the Mind,” it focused on cases when minds don’t function well (such as optical illusions), and what those reveal about adaptive systems that usually do work (see Course Plan). Topics included false memory, social conformity, and stereotyping. I brought guest lecturers from UVa (researchers in each area), and took students to visit their labs; students also conducted independent research. In 2006, I designed a seminar (“The Science of Memory”), where students met for 1½ hours daily and participated in a final competition (see Course Plan 2). We covered such areas as amnesia, prodigies, and Alzheimers, using hands-on demonstrations and multimedia. Students also learned practical strategies to improve their memory, and tested these at the final “Memory Olympics.”

ESL Teacher and Director of Studies, Brazil

While living in Brazil, I decided ESL was the most useful teaching contribution I could make, so I learned to teach it and taught for three years in two language schools. Such schools (typical in Brazil) offer 4- or 5-year sequenced English courses, both on a semester schedule and in intensive vacation courses (3-4 hrs/day, for a month). My students were adolescents and adults (mixed), and I taught all levels from beginning to advanced. The schools set the curricula, but I created my own classroom activities. In my last year in Brazil, I was asked to serve as Director of Studies (see Letter of Recommendation). As Director, I was responsible for hiring, training, and supervising a faculty of 6-9 teachers, as well as monitoring student satisfaction and progress. I also designed and oversaw extracurricular activities/events, along with a host of administrative responsibilities.
Course Design and Implementation

“I never knew that psychology included so much biology and experiments. I really enjoyed the hands-on activities and I thought the guest speaker was interesting.”

-8th grade summer enrichment student

Creating a course

I’d be hard pressed to pick my favorite part of teaching, but creating courses is a top candidate. I have been able to wholly design two intensive summer courses (for gifted middle/high schoolers): for each I created a central concept, and wove that concept explicitly through each day. For example, in the introductory psychology course (see Course Plan), I chose to put together a teasing array of just the most fascinating findings, touching on each major area of the field. I chose this design in the hope of piquing students’ interest to pursue later, comprehensive high school or college courses. The uniting theme behind my “teasers” was breakdown: failures of our minds which illuminate their inner workings and typical adaptivity. This allowed us to explore effects as far flung as perceptual illusions, stereotyping, and false memory (which I later expanded into a seminar; see Course Plan 2). The skill-based strand woven into the course was learning how psychological research is conducted. Each day we practiced a different step of the scientific method (culminating in independent experiments), and each day guest speakers from UVa also discussed their experience researching topics we’d covered.

Captivating students

Once I have a course concept, I’m sold – but the students are another matter. I find that a teacher’s own enthusiasm goes far in engaging students, but working with a wide range of students and subject contents has required me also to develop an array of techniques for drawing them in. Several courses I taught met for 3-4 hours a day, so they would be torture if I couldn’t make them varied and exciting. I took on this challenge with lots of hands-on demonstrations: in-class experiments for my psychology students (to practice data collection), or activities with travel magazine photographs for my ESL students (to practice prepositions). When I do give a brief lecture, I strive to be engaging and also to explain material in a way that particular class will understand. (One 8th grade student actually wrote on her evaluation that her favorite in-class activity was listening to me sit up front and talk!) Above all, variety is crucial, so I mix hands-on demos with lecture, discussion, debates, group work, videos, guest speakers, and/or field trips (see Course Plan). When directing a school, I initiated and obtained funding for extracurricular activities: like cooking classes on American foods, music lessons on pop songs – even a full Thanksgiving dinner (see Letter of Recommendation).

Building skills through assignments & activities.

Of course, piquing students’ interest is just the beginning. I teach to share valuable skills and information with students, not just because they’re interesting, but because they’re useful. I decide at the beginning of the course what skills I want students to learn, and design activities and assignments around those goals. For example, since I wanted my eighth graders to present their own research at the end of a two-week course, we worked each day on another step of the scientific method: practicing skills in class, and applying those skills to their projects for homework - one step at a time (see Course Plan). In my UVa psychology discussion sections (which included many freshmen), I wanted students to learn how to evaluate studies thoughtfully, draw connections among them, and discuss these ideas cogently both in class and in well-written papers. As a start, I had students bring brief reaction papers to each class: commenting on what had most interested them in the reading, then writing (and trying to answer) discussion questions (see Weekly Assignment). Students used these assignments to launch large and small group discussions, and later rated them to have been very helpful).
Setting the bar: Rigorous standards

I take my teaching seriously, and I expect my students to take their learning seriously – after all, they are the most interested parties! For me, high standards are what makes our work together serious. This does include strict grading, but goes far beyond that: high standards start with clear expectations, and progress with steady support. At UVa, for example, I gave a great deal of attention to my syllabus. Although the professor had already set the readings, I wanted my students to understand my policies: what preparation I expected of them, how I would assign grades, etc. (see Syllabus). I devoted in-class time to discussing paper assignments in depth, wrote guidelines, and always offered to read drafts/outlines ahead of time (one third of students took advantage of this). I graded papers by rubrics that I both discussed in advance and attached to the paper, so students could see exactly where they needed to improve (see Student Papers). In Brazil, when I taught ESL, the school I joined had struggled to adapt to market demands for a speedy course, and some students arrived at my upper-level courses without the necessary preparation. I graded them according to their work, which made for some failing grades, but I also made myself available outside class for extra tutoring. Students had remarkably favorable responses to this, even the ones that failed (see Student comments, Essay). I would not have traded any As for the shared joy of seeing them genuinely progress. (One of the greatest ironies of being “easy” on students, I think, it that it robs them of this very joy: if failure is not a possibility, then success is meaningless.) The administration supported my efforts: I presented my case for re-evaluating quality standards in a report to the owner, and he asked me to be faculty liaison starting a new committee to look into this (unfortunately, I moved before I could do so; see Letter of Recommendation 2).

Use of student feedback

Just like a well-intentioned student who hasn’t yet learned to study effectively, I have to admit that all my effort preparing for classes does not guarantee good results. Therefore, I make a point of seeking and incorporating student feedback in all teaching situations. In my summer courses, teachers prepared their own student evaluation forms: I chose to ask what students thought were the most important things they had learned from the course, as well as their reaction to specific activities (see Evaluation Form). I additionally decided to have students fill out daily exit cards. At the end of class, I gave each student a blank index card, and they wrote brief, anonymous comments: what had impacted them about the class, what they had liked, what they hadn’t. These were very helpful barometers, and usually quite positive. Some days, though, activities I’d spent hours preparing fell totally flat, and I had to face a few honest complaints. I took these into account: altering or replacing activities in the next session, and checking for students’ response (see Exit Cards). At UVa, students filled out official evaluations, but I drafted extra questions to supplement these (see Student Evaluations). In my first ESL school, student feedback was actually not routinely sought, but I wrote evaluation forms for my classes (mid-term and final), and again used responses to tailor activities and time allotment (see Student Comments: Brazil). I discussed the results with the class, and explained which aspects I could change (more pronunciation, for example), which I couldn’t (the book), and which I wouldn’t (always a few pleas for even more movies). Students appreciated having a voice, and I benefited greatly from the opportunity to improve my teaching.
Creating Synergy Between Teaching & Research

Q: Did you find reading & discussing the literature to be helpful?
A: “Absolutely – it was great to become accustomed to the lit search process, and the articles were very interesting and really put our research in context. I even realized how difficult it may have been to implement some of the studies I read, now knowing the research process first-hand.”
- Research assistant, Child Language & Learning Lab

During the past three years, I have been actively researching cognitive and developmental psychology as a graduate student at the University of Virginia. Though research must be my main focus, I have worked on weaving teaching into my research, and research into my teaching.

Bringing the Lab Into the Classroom

The most straightforward way to bring research and teaching together, of course, is to discuss one’s research in class. Even when not teaching a class independently, I’ve found some ways to do this: in review sessions, I’ve been able to expand on recapitulations of the lecture by mentioning more details of the research with which I am familiar (either through my own experiments or my literature reviews). One semester I also had the opportunity to give a short presentation in lecture on my research into children’s perception of language. When teaching my own discussion sections, of course, I had even more opportunities to discuss my work. Although it would not be appropriate to hijack the entire course into my subspecialty, I did feel it enriched the students’ experience to share some comments from an “insider” perspective (such as anecdotes about the realities of collecting data with children). Finally, when teaching gifted middle-schoolers about psychology, I chose to focus intensely on the process of actually conducting research: by speaking about my own, by each day bringing UVa researchers as guest speakers, and by each day discussing another step of the scientific method, so that by the end of the course students were presenting findings from experiments they themselves had chosen, conducted, and written up (see Course Plan).

Bringing the Classroom Into the Lab

In my child psychology laboratory, six to eight undergraduates work for course credit each semester. We have a general policy of involving them in all aspects of the research: discussing literature and interacting with children, for example, instead of just photocopying. I personally have been responsible for supervising 1-2 students in a semester, and have also been active in lab-wide initiatives. I have been asked to contribute to the revision of the lab manual, and to draft a contract for RAs (framing our goals and setting clear expectations). I also initiated and developed an evaluation we used mid-semester to check their satisfaction with the workload, training, degree of autonomy, etc. (see Survey for RAs). Finally, I created a wiki where graduate students (and undergraduates considering graduate school) could access information about journals in our field, life in academia, etc. (see http://graduateresources.pbwiki.com).

With my own students, I have taught experimental skills (training in data collection, ethics and experimental design), and broader academic skills (how to conduct literature searches, the lengthy process of publication, etc.). At all times I have stressed both the hows and the whys of our work: reading journal articles and meeting to discuss them, or talking through decisions on the next phase of our project. I have also strived to promote my students’ autonomy. They were the most productive team in the lab -- calling the greatest number of families to schedule, and running the greatest number of participants – and they maintained high quality throughout, enough for us to not to see in the data any confounding experimenter effects (differences in how experimenters conducted sessions).
Investment in Teaching

“During the time in which Ms. Lima was at Wizard, she consistently fulfilled her duties with great responsibility, discipline, dedication, competence, punctuality, and team spirit. She has greatly contributed to the growth of the school.”
- Owner & Executive Director, Brazilian ESL school

Teaching can be a very solitary profession: the default is for teachers to close their door and conduct classes alone. I have always sought to create opportunities to move beyond this solitude, so that teachers can learn from each other, and find support. When I directed a school, I was able to implement policies to foster these interactions. As a graduate student, I have taken advantage of the many resources offered by the University of Virginia’s Teaching Resource Center, and have conducted and presented research investigating ways to teach more effectively.

Teaching teachers
When I first began serving as Director of Studies of a language school in Brazil, one of my highest priorities was to improve the pedagogical support for the faculty. First, I initiated weekly meetings, where we discussed both practical issues and specific weekly topics in pedagogy: everything from ethics to a group strategy for teaching each book in our multi-year sequences. After each of these discussions, I wrote summaries that I later compiled into a Teacher’s Manual (I also wrote a Director’s Manual). I then initiated classroom observations: I visited each teacher at least once per semester, and created a protocol to record my notes, which we then discussed after class. Additional feedback for teachers came from student evaluations that I wrote for the end of each semester. Finally, I revised and extended the training protocol for new teachers, and personally trained the three I hired.

University resources
The Teaching Resource Center at UVa offers a remarkably wide and rich set of resources for both faculty and graduate teaching assistants. I was selected to participate in a professional development program called “Tomorrow’s Professor Today” (see http://www.trc.virginia.edu/Programs/TPT) in which a small group of graduate students completes a systematic program of activities, and enjoys small roundtable discussions. I have also attended many workshops to date, ranging from panel discussions (such as UVa alumni teaching in diverse environments), to day-long workshops (developing skills such as preparing articles for successful publication). In one conference offered by the Instructional Technology team, I learned useful new techniques for preparing visual aids, among other topics.

Contributions to research on effective teaching
Even as a researcher, I am constantly teaching. At the University of Virginia, undergraduate students receive course credit for working in laboratories, and graduate students are often responsible for supervising them. However, graduate students do not typically receive any training for this role. I collaborated with a group of colleagues (in separate areas of the department) to investigate how we could better support graduate student mentors and make the undergraduates’ research experience more educational. As a beginning step in this line of inquiry, we conducted a survey across a sample of psychology laboratories: we asked RAs to describe what duties they performed, what kinds of instructional interactions they had, and what their expectations were. Interestingly, RAs indicated that they would like to participate more in data analysis – a stage at which graduate students typically take over research. We presented our findings at the Teaching Institute of the Association for Psychological Science’s national convention (see Poster Presented).
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