

# NITOP: Promoting Teaching That Matters (Even in a Pandemic)

October 29, 2020

The emergency pivot to remote learning this spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to reconsider how they teach and what their goals were as teachers. There was the scramble to master new technologies, as well as the need for those of us who had never taught online to reimagine the structure of our courses to provide rich, accessible learning experiences for students. We also had to grapple with new problems, both procedural (How can I make sure students are paying attention? How can I prevent cheating in online tests?) and humanitarian (How can I work with students whose lives are disrupted by illness and death, financial uncertainty, family instability, and lack of access to technology?). Academic conferences, our usual outlets for professional development and comparing notes with colleagues, were cancelled or moved online, including the conference that I run, the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP).

NITOP 2021 will be held online on January 4, 2021. Registration is full. NITOP 2022 is scheduled for January 3-6, 2022, in St. Pete Beach, Florida. APS is a Platinum Sponsor; registration will be discounted for APS members. Stay tuned to [nitop.org](http://nitop.org) for registration details.

APS members will receive discounted registration to NITOP 2022.

[View recorded lectures for the 2021 conference on the NITOP YouTube channel.](#)

NITOP is the oldest and largest conference dedicated to the teaching of psychology. In its 43-year history, we've developed a format that offers our attendees support and professional development. Every year, we curate a set of 16 invited speakers to address both enduring and emerging issues in teaching. We have traditional poster sessions on pedagogical research and innovation, but we also have the Teaching Slam, a set of rapid-fire presentations on new approaches to teaching, and Demo Demo, where participants become students as the presenter carries out an innovative teaching activity. COVID-19 forced us to reconsider how best to serve teachers of psychology in these unusual times. We cancelled our in-person conference, but instead of simply moving it online, we set out to create a virtual conference optimized to address the issues teachers are facing right now. Because time is in such short supply for teachers, we decided to condense NITOP 2021 into one afternoon of synchronous activities on January 4, 2021, from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Zoom.

## High-Impact Professional Development

Although relatively brief, NITOP 2021 ([nitop.org](http://nitop.org)) will provide high-impact professional development. NITOP has always curated its speakers and presenters to create a comprehensive program that features both established leaders as well as new voices in the teaching of psychology. We are keeping to that practice with two keynote speakers and six Teaching Slam presentations. In our first keynote, David Myers (Hope College) will speak on "Life in the Time of COVID: Psychology's Insights and Tips." Our second speaker is Apryl Alexander (University of Denver), who will speak on "Using Psychology

for the Public Good: Social Justice and Advocacy.” The presentations will leave ample time for questions. The Teaching Slam will consist of six brief presentations, each describing an idea or activity that teachers can incorporate directly into their teaching. Normally we select presenters from submissions, but this year we are inviting back some of our most popular speakers from past NITOP conferences to give their best tips for teaching during the pandemic.

NITOP 2021 will also have an asynchronous portion. We have asked some of our best past speakers to record mini-lectures that faculty can easily incorporate into their online courses, saving class-preparation time by providing them with high-quality presentations on topics recorded by subject experts. These mini-lectures will cover a wide array of topics. For instance, I’ve already recorded a presentation on “Learning During Pandemic Times,” addressing the obstacles and pitfalls that students face when trying to study—challenging under the best of conditions, and all the more so during a pandemic. In another presentation, Beth Morling (University of Delaware) will explain some key points in research methods. The lectures will be posted to the [NITOP YouTube channel](#) as they are recorded.



Speakers from NITOP 2020, held last January in Florida, include several APS Fellows as well as Stephen Chew, conference chair (back row, third from right).

Finally, we have not forgotten that one of the most beneficial aspects of any conference is the opportunity for attendees to socialize and share ideas with like-minded colleagues. Too often, teachers work in isolation and rarely have a chance to discuss issues with other teachers. NITOP tries to provide the time, space, and opportunities, both formal and informal, for teachers to talk and help each other. We will end the day with “breakout rooms” that will allow attendees to discuss the day’s presentations or current challenges in teaching, much like the Participant Idea Exchanges we host in our regular

conference. We have also planned fun social activities for stress relief, such as our annual Nearly Impossible Trivia of Psychology contest.

NITOP 2021 will be free, with registration required for the synchronous program. Registration is full, but presentations will be publicly available on the NITOP website after the event, with the permission of presenters.

## Teaching's Critical Impact

NITOP is dedicated to the idea that nothing is more important for the future of psychological science than improving the teaching of psychology. Although the profession needs to attract a steady stream of talented students for graduate study, most of our students will not go on to graduate school in psychology. These, however, are the people we most need to convince of the value of psychological science and the need to support psychological research. Introductory psychology is among the most popular college courses in terms of enrollment, and it provides the best opportunity for shaping accurate beliefs and perceptions, assuming it is taught well. Introductory psychology can teach students valuable skills and knowledge that are applicable beyond college. For instance, consider the amount of suffering and death that could have been prevented during this pandemic if more people understood the difference between good science (well-designed studies with valid conclusions), bad science (poorly designed studies with invalid conclusions), and pseudoscience (beliefs mistakenly thought to have a scientific basis). Imagine if more people were aware of the dangers of biases in thinking, and if they knew how to detect misinformation.

The question NITOP has grappled with during its entire history is, “How do we improve the teaching of psychology?” The pandemic has revealed that this simple question defies a simple answer. Our students come to our classes with different levels of motivation, different amounts of prior understanding (and misconceptions), different personal challenges, and different learning resources available to them. This has always been the case; the pandemic has only made it more obvious. Our job as teachers is to develop a generative and transformative understanding of psychology in as many of our students as possible, despite the many challenges. That is why effective teaching is a complex skill that takes years to develop.

For many psychologists, most if not all of their “training” in how to teach comes from having to figure it out once they are assigned to teach a course. Even graduate students fortunate enough to receive formal training may find teaching full-time to be an overwhelming experience. NITOP exists to provide professional development in teaching for aspiring as well as veteran teachers of psychology. We strive to provide our attendees with a myriad of teaching ideas and innovations they may not have been aware of before.

We are proud that APS has been a longtime partner with NITOP. APS has long understood the connection between the teaching of psychology and the future of psychological science. Many of our speakers are APS members. When they speak at NITOP, their focus is on what teachers should understand about their research to help inform teaching. For speakers, it is a rare opportunity to disseminate their ideas and research through an international network of psychology teachers.

We hope to be back to our traditional face-to face format by January 2022. We want to be back at our

usual conference location in St. Pete Beach, Florida, but we will remain flexible, just as teachers need to be, in the face of pandemic uncertainty.