

Teaching Psychology: Graduate Student Shares His Lessons Learned from a Summer Teaching Undergraduate Statistics

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Although the *Observer* does a good job conveying ideas about the teaching of psychology in its “Teaching Tips” section, I sometimes have felt that graduate students who are teaching face a unique role and need these tips conveyed to them in a different manner. Whereas experienced teachers incorporate these tips into their existing teaching styles, graduate student instructors are developing their own teaching methods. For this reason, teaching an advanced undergraduate level statistics course this past semester has been one of the most time consuming and demanding aspects of my graduate school career. Through the wisdom given to me by many excellent teachers as well as through my own trial and error, I have learned some valuable lessons for graduate student instructors.

First, you are the expert in the area you are teaching. Your expertise is likely a result of your own interest in and enjoyment of the topic. Your level of energy can make the most “boring” class exciting and the most exciting information dull. When I heard that I was an expert from several different sources before I started teaching, I was slightly alarmed because my idea of an expert in statistics is far beyond where I consider myself. However, it is quite unlikely that any of my students roll out of bed on a Saturday morning to start running factor analyses.

Secondly, get organized in all aspects of your life, not just in teaching. In addition to having lectures and materials ready for class, be sure to structure your own course work, research obligations, and personal life in a manageable way. Be sure to spend time every week engaging in at least one activity unrelated to your work. This type of preparation will serve to eliminate many of your worries, and will convey a certain level of preparedness that contributes to a good classroom atmosphere. Additionally, teaching well is a time consuming task, and this means organization in all areas of your life is essential. You will need to schedule time to write assignments, to grade, and to prepare lectures.

Third, take your audience into account. Although I made it clear that my course had a prerequisite of a basic psychology statistics class, it is useful to get an understanding of exactly where your students are in terms of their abilities and to teach closely to this level. In addition to assessing their level of statistical ability, this also encourages students to be more comfortable participating in class.

Fourth, pick a few excellent examples and stick with them throughout the course. On the one hand, your students might find this somewhat boring, as they are used to hearing new examples with each class. This means that you will have to do some work to add in humor to make these examples more exciting. However, this technique will allow your students to see how new information builds on former materials. Additionally, it makes the relationships between concepts that sometimes seem very different from one another much clearer.

Finally, consult with someone who has taught the course before to get teaching ideas. You might seek a colleague who is not as familiar with the course you are teaching to try out new ideas. Piloting some

ideas is helpful, especially if you use a number of different people including your fellow graduate students.

I was surprised to hear my students make statements like “I like the ANCOVA” and “I want to know more about factor analysis” after taking my class, and I think that these remarks would not have been made if I did not utilize strategies such as these.