

Teaching Statement

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Simply put, I love teaching. In 2017, I was awarded the Rutgers University Presidential Fellowship for Teaching Excellence. Although this award is incredibly heartwarming, my personal connection with the students and my time with them in the classroom and my lab are what bring me the most joy. Because I see teaching as transcending the physical space of the classroom, this statement captures not only my formal teaching, but also extensions of it in student research supervision and mentoring.

My Training and Pedagogical Approach

Before earning my Ph.D. in Linguistics, I earned a B.A. with a Major in Education (with a focus on linguistic and multicultural issues), and an M.Ed. also in Education with an additional certification and focus on Montessori education (which was a part of my own educational background). My own pedagogical approach has its roots in constructivism. The premise of this philosophy is that the learner constructs their knowledge out of their experience, and that education is not mere acquisition of concepts, but *active engagement* in content in such a way that there is a bridge between the classroom and the real world. The study of language and linguistics lends itself beautifully to such an approach, since students can quite easily recognize the central role of language in our communication with others as a powerful factor that can unify (or divide) members of society, and as a means to understand the way our brain works. Psycholinguistics and language acquisition present the perfect opportunity to offer meaningful hands-on training in linguistics.

Content-to-Self and Content-to-World Connections

I think it is important for students to have a personal connection in the class as much as possible. I accomplish this in a number of ways with the undergraduates I teach. I make sure that by the second class meeting, I have learned the names of all of my students, and I refer to them by name in class throughout the semester. On the first day of class, I always ask my students to introduce themselves. The information they share helps to shape the course content. For example, in 101, I incorporate information about bilingualism, code-switching, ‘non-standard’ English dialects or language in education to connect with students from multilingual backgrounds, or who are studying to be teachers. In Pragmatics, a few weeks into the semester, I ask my students to complete an index card listing three fun facts about them. I then create personalized practice sets on issues like entailment, presuppositions, and implicatures incorporating this information. Doing this has two very positive side effects. First, this means they are easily able to conjure up an example to illustrate these concepts. Second, the students work on these practice sets in small groups, so the content from these practice sets helps them build connections with each other.

I frequently ask my students to bring in content and experiences from outside the class. I do this, for example, with ‘mondegreens’ (misheard song lyrics), and pragmatics ‘scavenger hunts’ where I ask them to bring in examples of items like definite descriptions, presupposition triggers, and predicates of personal taste ‘in the wild’. I incorporate their examples into the class slides, and enjoy seeing the wide variety of examples and their creativity in finding them. In-class activities such as guessing the names of movies or celebrities based on IPA transcriptions also help students build a bridge between their outside knowledge and in-class content.

Above and beyond all of this, however, I want my students to know that their life experiences and their observations – that *they* – are valid. They may think all of this doesn’t connect to the course, but it does. I want them to carry our course beyond the classroom.

Class Formats and Innovations

The format of my classes varies within and across classes, depending on the class, and includes lecture, small-group work, student presentations, and discussions. The media and content are also varied: short videos, content from past and recent news articles, websites, in-class student polls, small-group work, and activities such as IPA or Pragmatics Bingo. One of my favorite tools is the online discussion forum in our course management software. Each forum covers a specific topic, and students are required to post ‘something substantive’ each week. I make a point of not posting in the forum myself, so that students are free to post and comment in each other’s posts; however, I read each exchange, and follow up in class on key points, examples, and areas of confusion. The outcome always impresses me: in the beginning of the semester, students are somewhat nervous about sharing their comments and formulaic in their responses, but by the end of the semester, they’re actively posting with questions about the assigned readings, asking each other for clarification, and providing detailed support for each other. It’s awesome.

In my graduate courses, I incorporate lecture, student presentations, in-class experiments and surveys, reviewing of conference abstracts reporting experimental research, debates between authors across papers, and explanation of experimental methodology and design. One of my favorite comments from a student was that she had anticipated learning a lot about experiments, but she was amazed at how much she also learned about semantic and pragmatic theory from this seminar. This was, of course, my plan, and the theory was tightly interwoven into nearly everything we covered in the course of the semester.

Courses Taught and Teaching Interests

With the department of Linguistics, at the undergraduate level, I have taught Introduction to Linguistics, Pragmatics, and Experimental Methodologies in Language Acquisition. At the graduate level, I have taught seminars in Experimental Syntax, Experimental Advances in Semantics and Pragmatics, and Language Acquisition. I have consistently sought out opportunities to reach a broader audience beyond linguistics and expand my experience beyond my assigned courses. I have taught undergraduate seminars through the University Byrne seminars for first-year students (‘Language Games and Talking Heads’) and the University Honors College (‘Language, Categories, and Cognition’). In addition, I have taught Introduction to Cognitive Science, and am scheduled to teach a Cognitive Science course on ‘Sound and Meaning’ next semester. I have also supervised undergraduate students in independent studies in both Linguistics and Cognitive Science, and given guest lectures in undergraduate and graduate RuCCS proseminars on topics related to semantics in language acquisition. I would be interested in teaching courses such as these or others related to meaning (Semantics and Pragmatics), Psycholinguistics/Acquisition, or Cognitive Science at either the undergraduate or graduate level.

My personal interest in teaching translates to taking an active role in determining the undergraduate curricula for Linguistics and for the Center for Cognitive Science (RuCCS), through my membership on the Undergraduate Curriculum and Program Assessment Committee in Linguistics and the Advisory Committee in RuCCS.

I have also accepted invitations to teach outside of my university. In June of 2015, I taught a week-long graduate-level course on ‘Semantics in Acquisition’ at the University College London as an invited instructor for the Advanced Core Training in Linguistics (ACTL) summer school. I was also invited to the summer school at the Université du Québec à Montréal in June 2016, to talk about pragmatics in language acquisition. This summer, I will teach ‘Acquisition of Semantics’ at the LSA Linguistic Summer Institute.

Supervision of Student Research

One of the highlights of being a professor and the PI of a lab is being able to work closely with students on research. As a faculty member at Rutgers, I have closely advised 30+ undergraduate RAs in my lab. I have been the faculty sponsor for three successful small grants (out of three proposals) through the Aresty research center, and will have supervised at least three undergraduate honors theses by the spring of 2017. My graduating seniors remain in contact with me as they transition beyond college, and have successfully gone on to top graduate programs. My approach with the students I advise and the research assistants in my lab reflects a balance of my being very hands-on in the beginning and gradually more hands-off. In this way, I hope to provide them with structure, and clear expectations, which then guide them as they take ownership of their learning and research. I love watching them present their work. With my undergraduate RAs, I see this payoff every year, as I watch them run my lab as a team with little direction from me in the spring semester, and present our lab's research in the annual university-wide undergraduate research forum in late April. My undergraduate and graduate students consistently deliver excellent presentations at venues such as NELS, CLS, the LSA Annual Meeting, and BUCLD.

At Rutgers, I have supervised multiple undergraduate honors theses, served on a number of graduate student qualifying paper or qualifying exam committees (at least five chaired), and been a member of multiple Masters committees, and a member of seven dissertation committees (two co-chaired), spanning Linguistics, Psychology, and Spanish and Portuguese. The co-chaired committees represent a natural bridge between theoretical and experimental approaches to the topic at hand. For a number of of these committees, my supervisory role in experimental research with the student translated into our coauthoring a journal article.

Further enrichment

Over the years, I have welcomed opportunities to enhance my training and reflect upon my role as an instructor and mentor in my classes, in my lab, and with the individual students whose research I supervise. As a graduate student at Northwestern, I participated in the Center for Teaching Excellence. As a faculty member at Rutgers University, I have attended workshops on teaching technology and resources, pedagogical approaches, and active learning. I have observed graduate students in TA positions and met with them afterwards to offer feedback.

Mentoring

While mentoring is not strictly categorized in teaching, I wish to mention my participation in mentoring in different capacities as a way of highlighting the importance of supporting professional development. For the last few years, I have been a Faculty Mentor for the Rutgers Honors Program, coordinated activities with students leading the First-Year Interest Group in Language and Linguistics, and sponsored RAs through the Aresty Research Center. Last year I was the faculty mentor for a graduate student in the Communicating Science course. This year I am participating in a year-long Rutgers-wide Mentoring initiative as a mentee. As part of a subgroup of the Committee on the Status of Women in Linguistics (COSWL), I have worked closely with six other women to launch the successful 'Pop-Up Mentoring (PUM)' initiative. Over the course of the last year, we have coordinated PUM events at multiple linguistics conferences in North America and Europe, with over 70 participants in mentor-mentee pairings. The upcoming LSA Annual Meeting will be our biggest venue yet. We are thrilled to fill this gap and provide this resource to the field.