

Hogyeum 'Evan' Joo

Teaching Statement: Fostering Curious, Confident, and Engaged Learners

My teaching philosophy is grounded in student-centered approaches that promote curiosity, creativity, and active engagement. I find that students learn more effectively when they feel comfortable participating and see meaningful connections to their own lives and goals, which encourages deeper questioning and intellectual risk-taking. I encourage students to remain curious and proactive in exploring possibilities, and reinforce curiosity as a foundational mindset in science learning by saying this: *“Be nosy and find out, and always ask yourself the question of ‘Why is it like that?’ towards everything”*. This teaching statement outlines what I bring to my courses as I strive to foster student confidence and success, and inspire students to become lifelong learners who remain engaged with the scientific world, regardless of their ultimate career paths.

Teaching Experience

During my undergraduate studies, I was involved in developing the curriculum for new courses within my interdisciplinary academic program. For the first course, Collective Action and Advocacy, I developed and led several lectures and discussions as an undergraduate teaching assistant. This course was offered for the first time as a major-required course and received strong student and faculty reviews. The second, Agroecology Lecture and Lab, was a new course that I co-developed with my faculty mentor. I developed the lab manual and weekly lab materials and co-authored the course plan and proposal, which were submitted to the Director of the program by the time I graduated.

During my graduate studies, I served as a laboratory instructor for two courses, Principles of Biology and Biological Research Laboratory. Both were introductory biology courses, the first for non-STEM majors and the second for biology majors. As an instructor, I worked closely with students at pivotal moments in their academic careers, often during their first exposure to college-level science. Within this context, my teaching goal is to create learning environments that cultivate confidence, curiosity, and a sense of belonging in the sciences while supporting core learning outcomes.

During my time as a laboratory instructor, I consistently received strong quantitative evaluations. Across Fall 2021, Spring/Fall 2022, and Fall 2023, my teaching effectiveness ratings ranged from 4.52 to 4.95 out of 5, consistently exceeding course, level, and departmental averages by up to 0.7 points. Students rated my preparedness, responsiveness to questions, ability to generate interest, and instructional effectiveness at similarly high levels, reflecting sustained teaching quality across semesters. In Spring 2023 and 2024, instead of teaching, I served in a managerial position, overseeing overall lab activities, teaching assistants, and safety protocols, while assisting the lab's instructional support supervisor. Each semester, a substantial number of students from my lab sections earned grades that placed them in the top 30% of the course, often achieving the highest grades among 130+ students.

Building Personal Connections and Trust

A defining strength of my teaching approach is building strong and personalized academic connections with students. I make a deliberate effort to learn about students' interests, backgrounds, and uncertainties early in the semester so that I can tailor my explanations and examples to better resonate with them. I also draw on my own academic journey from early uncertainty as an undergraduate to doctoral training, to emphasize that not having a clearly defined path is common, and the process of figuring it out is still productive. Students consistently described this approach in end-of-semester course evaluations as creating a supportive and approachable learning environment, noting that I was “very easy to talk to” and that I “made everything easy to understand and made students not afraid to ask questions.”

Additionally, I make myself accessible before and after class and maintain flexible office hours to support students seeking help with course material, exam preparation, or broader academic and career-related questions. This allows me to share my personal experiences more directly with students and contribute to their academic and personal growth, ultimately enhancing their college learning experience through personalized support and mentorship. In fact, several students with whom I developed long-term mentorship relationships went on to secure internships and research opportunities during their junior and senior years.

Making Lessons Relatable

The central feature of my teaching approach is to utilize concrete strategies that make laboratory sessions more responsive and relevant to students' needs. During the first week of lab, I conduct a brief questionnaire of my own design to learn about students' academic interests, personal curiosities, and future goals. Using this information, I incorporate relevant examples, discussion prompts, and visual materials into lab sessions while ensuring that all required course content is fully covered. Students repeatedly described my 4-hour lab sessions as “interactive,” “fun,” and “engaging,” noting that even extended lab sessions “never felt that long” due to the engaging learning environment.

I took advantage of the flexibility allowed by the course director to thoughtfully adapt my instructional approach while maintaining consistency with course objectives and learning outcomes. I invested time in understanding the purpose and structure of each lab and leveraging that understanding to build student-centered learning experiences. Each week, I prepared slides with ‘fun-facts’ along with lesson materials that were not mentioned in the lab manual but were relevant to students' academic programs. At the end of every lesson, I also included a discussion on how the specific knowledge or activities could be applied to real-world research environments, emphasized with examples taken from current news articles. The opportunity to exercise pedagogical judgment within a structured framework contributed directly to increased student engagement.

I place strong emphasis on helping students understand why each lab experience matters. Many students, particularly first-year students and undecided sophomores, initially approach laboratory work as another task to complete rather than a meaningful learning opportunity. Furthermore, since the courses I taught were primarily geared toward non-STEM majors, I personally felt that sparking interest in the natural sciences was another critical responsibility of mine. To make the learning experience more meaningful for these students, I connect laboratory skills and materials such as field sampling, data interpretation, and experimental design, and academic presentation skills to a wide range of disciplines and careers, drawing on examples from colleagues and professionals in my personal network, so that students can see how these are practical, transferable skills relevant to their own potential career paths. During the last lab session of each semester, I facilitate a reflective discussion in which students articulate how they might apply what they have learned beyond the course. I also share my own academic story, emphasizing that discovering one's interests takes time, and encourage students to remain curious and “*be nosy and find out*”. Students frequently noted that I “encouraged intellectual growth,” “made the material relatable to real life,” and created a “learning atmosphere that was both rigorous and enjoyable.”

Critical Thinking and Collective Discussion

These combined efforts helped students to feel included and heard, which elevated engagement and facilitated authentic participation. Students were increasingly willing to generate unplanned discussions, exchange ideas, and practice critical thinking using their peers' perspectives as catalysts. I encourage them to ask questions to themselves, one another, and to me, framing inquiry as a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden. With this experience in mind, I plan to become an educator who engages students deeply, shaping the next generation of learners into curious, confident, and engaged citizens.