Teaching Philosophy: Leah Persky

My approach to teaching is based on empowering students to be self-directed and active learners. My goal is for students to leave my class with a deeper understanding of the world around them, and an awareness of the key theoretical and analytic issues related to the topic. I hope to inspire critical thinking skills and allow opportunities for cultivating a variety of skills. I have completed several trainings and conferences on best practices in higher education teaching including attending the Lily International Teaching Conference in May of 2015 and completing a month long online teaching methods course through the University of Denver in May 2015. Below I will focus on: the variety of methods I employ in my courses, the relationships I work on cultivating with students, how I integrate and update course-relevant content and finally, I will highlight my teaching experiences at a variety of institutions.

I acknowledge that even in a small class, there are a variety of types of learners. I attempt to reflect this in the course assignments and requirements. For example I have found that it is effective to have a mix of exams, group work, presentations and writing assignments. This allows students to learn how to succeed in a variety of environments and to learn multiple practical skills that will help them in their future academic and employment endeavors. For example in the Research Methods Practicum I teach at the University of Denver, students participate in peer-review writing exercises, an in-class debate, and in blogging activities related to current events. This helps to encourage engagement, responsibility, communication skills and builds public speaking skills. In this same course I also work closely with students to assist them in developing a research proposal which employs many elements covered in the course. These one-on-one meetings allow me to work closely with students, assess their knowledge, and help them to create a focused and practical research plan. Students find these meetings to be very helpful and an integral part of their learning experiences in the course. The variety of assignments helps students learn different practical skills and demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of formats. While the feeling of on-line classes is different I also try to encourage students in the same ways as in-person classes by providing a variety of types of assignments and presenting information through various methods. For example, in a recent course I had students in an on-line course visit local organizations and interview leaders in their community on public health issues. This summer I am also working on Twitter to incorporate engagement with current events in my online health course.

My goal is to create a cooperative classroom environment which fosters critical thinking and helps students acquire analytic reasoning skills. This means I encourage the class to work together in a variety of ways. I make group-work an important aspect of class and encourage students to work together as part of group presentations, during in-class assignments, and for exam preparation. I make myself available to students both in and outside of the classroom. I believe that through creating these relationships students will feel like they are part of a larger team, have access to many resources, and will be more invested in their learning experience.
I attempt to provide relevant, practical, and engaging content for my courses. I carefully chose and update course content including text books, scholarly articles, edited books, newspaper articles, current events, and short films found from a variety of online sources. For example in my Comparative Politics course, we were studying Brazil as a case. We watched a variety of current events on the instability in Brazil, with a focus on Zika and the unfolding impeachment processes. Students then conducted research and engaged in debate regarding whether or not the 2016 Olympic Games should proceed as scheduled. Not only did students enjoy the experience, they gained practical research skills, public speaking experience, and analytic skills. Multiple students mentioned that this was their favorite class of the quarter.

I have taught in a variety of university settings from a community college to a prominent liberal arts school. I have taught both traditional and non-traditional students. I treat students as individuals and acknowledge that there are a variety of reasons that people take a class. I strive to create an effective, open, and accessible learning experience that all types of students and learners can benefit from.

I have had the opportunity to learn from a variety of excellent teachers and professors in diverse settings. From my experiences as a student I have been able to observe what I think works best in specific classroom environments. My own teachers have inspired me to be a clear, open-minded, creative teacher, who is interested in her students and has clear and high expectations. I expect dedication, respect, and hard-work from my students because in my experience I believe this fosters the most productive and meaningful type of learning environment.

To conclude, my goal is to create a learning environment which is stimulating, discussion provoking, includes student directed learning, encourages analytic thinking and is based on open communication and respect. To achieve these goals I provide a rigorous class which I believe reaches multiple types of learners. This type of class encourages learning for student and professor alike. My teaching evaluations provide empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of my teaching, and demonstrate growth over time. I greatly enjoy teaching and continually strive to become a more effective, engaging, and innovative teacher.