Rebecca Frazier Teaching Statement/Philosophy

“My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing.”
William James, Principles of Psychology (1890)

It was 2am on Thursday night when I found myself sitting in a Waffle House restaurant quietly observing the staff and taking notes in a small red journal. My favorite professor, Don Forsyth, had given me an assignment to go out and observe a real group in action, analyze their behavior, and report back on what I had seen. While we had read about the principles of group dynamics in our textbook, the experience of applying that knowledge in this setting sparked a deeper interest and understanding of the importance of psychology in real life. From Don, I learned that the best classes challenge student’s thinking and apply James’ (1890) principle that thinking is for doing. Now as a scholar and teacher myself, my primary goal is to enrich student thinking through doing-- both inside and outside of the classroom. To meet this goal I (1) practice learning by doing with hands on activities, (2) foster intrinsic motivation in students, (3) mentor students through research, (4) incorporate research into teaching, and (5) use feedback to evaluate and improve my teaching.

Learning by Doing. I engage my students with hands-on activities and demonstrations to help them see psychology in action. For example, when teaching intro psych I designed a lab on lie detection in which students read about the use of fMRI technology for lie detection and watched an interview with psychologist Carol Travis on how to trick lie detectors. In class students were then able to use galvanic skin response equipment similar to the ones described in their readings to try to guess when their partner was telling a truthful statement versus a lie. After analyzing this data in class, we assessed the accuracy of the GSR equipment and used this and the published evidence to motivate a discussion about the costs and benefits of using lie detection technology in legal settings.

In addition to developing hands on activities and labs, I provide my students with frequent opportunities to practice and improve their communication and writing skills. In my social psychology course, students wrote weekly 1-page papers connecting social psychological concepts to recent news stories, designed experiment ideas based on their readings, and wrote up short summaries of conversations with friends and family members about our class topics. Students shared excerpts of their writing during class discussions and I provided frequent feedback on their content and comprehensibility.

Fostering intrinsic motivation in students. One of my primary goals for teaching is to show students what they can do with what they are learning to increase their intrinsic motivation to learn. When I was supervising my laboratory’s research assistant program I had my students choose a topic, become an expert on it, and then create or edit a Wikipedia page about it. This gave students ownership over a particular part of psychology and allowed them to make a real contribution to public knowledge. One of my students contributions, for example, is a major part of Wikipedia’s Implicit Association Test entry.

In my statistics course I wanted to help students who had anxiety about math and science to see the personal relevance of statistics in their life. To do this, I encouraged students to bring articles with questionable statistical claims to class. For example, when one student brought in an article saying that blueberries significantly decreased the risk of cancer we used that as an opportunity to discuss the difference between correlation and causation. Then, when it came time to prepare for the first test I generated a sample problem comparing the effects of eating more blueberries to the effects of increased exercise.
Mentoring Students through Research. In addition to my more traditional teaching experiences, I seek out teaching and mentoring opportunities with research assistants. I apply my thinking is for doing motto to their training as well. During my second year of grad school I revamped our lab research assistant program and created the first formal lab syllabus for an RA course. With the revised syllabus, we shifted our focus from training RAs to collect and enter data to helping them prepare for graduate school, getting them involved in independent research projects, teaching them computer programming, study design and analysis skills, and making a strong commitment to RA training as a serious educational experience for RAs. To encourage RAs to develop novel research ideas, we held a research idea competition where undergraduates presented an entire hypothetical study (from background literature to anticipated results) and competed for the honor of having their idea turned into an active project in the lab. From this idea competition I developed a project with one of my students looking at the extent to which we want leaders to engage in unethical actions on our behalf and we are currently using this project to apply for a University-wide award and hope to turn it into a joint publication. I take great pride in the fact that I have supervised several excellent undergraduates that are pursuing advanced degrees in psychology. One, for example, is completing a PhD in social psychology at Stanford and we are currently working on a collaborative paper evaluating the effectiveness of ethics education programs. I encourage my students to apply for university grants, scholarships, conferences, and internships and I provide advice, feedback, and editing services along the way.

Incorporating Research into Teaching. Since “thinking is for doing,” I view my research as an integral part of how I do my teaching. By devoting at least one lecture per semester to talking about my own data I am able to help students connect the course content with the ongoing process of research and as a result I have had several of my students go on to work in my lab. I also help students see the value of research by having guest speakers (such as members of my lab and experts on key topics) present their research to my students and encouraging students to prepare questions for the speaker in advance. To further foster an appreciation for research I encourage my students to attend talks and colloquiums within the department and the broader community and I invite them to participate in the piloting of my studies so that they can experience the research process.

Using Feedback To Evaluate and Improve. I view feedback as a two-way street— in addition to providing my students with frequent feedback about their progress towards our course goals, I regularly solicit frequent feedback about my own effectiveness as a teacher. For example, in one midpoint semester evaluation my research students expressed a desire to learn more advanced study design techniques. I organized a workshop to teach them basic programming skills and together we programmed new measures for the Project Implicit website. In order to better evaluate and improve my teaching, I elected to participate in a graduate teacher training program. I also attend special seminars on teaching, read widely about teaching techniques, record my lectures, and seek feedback from other professors and colleagues in my field about my performance.

I would feel comfortable teaching a wide range of courses related to undergraduate statistics, social psychology, introduction to psychology, implicit social cognition, leadership, and ethics. I have also designed a unique and active seminar course on the social psychology of leadership that personifies my teaching philosophy. This class integrates active experiences in the classroom such as demonstrations, guest speakers, and videos with regular outside of the classroom events where students observe, interact, and reflect on experiences with real groups of leaders and followers in the community.