Teaching Statement

I truly enjoy teaching, and my formal and informal interactions with students are among the most rewarding of my professional life. I feel comfortable teaching large entry level undergraduate classes as well as smaller classes for psychology majors and seminars for graduate students and have, over the years, developed distinct goals and strategies for dealing with the unique challenges and opportunities presented by each setting.

My main goal for undergraduate teaching is to help students develop a broad understanding of developmental theories and, more importantly, to help them to see how research findings can be used to inform and enrich the lives of developing children and those who care for them. To these ends I use assignments, as well as classroom discussions, as contexts in which students can reflect on their own development and examine developmental issues as they arise in real life. Examples of assignments I have developed include writing a developmentally-based analysis of children’s books, interviewing parents to determine how parenting goals and parenting strategies change as the child grows, and writing letters to Utah legislators on child-related or family-related topics and making research-based policy recommendations. I also think it is extremely important that undergraduate students develop their writing skills. For many years I’ve conducted writing workshops in my classes and had students complete a series of short writing assignments which they rewrote (typically more than once) in response to feedback; unfortunately, this type of experience has become more rare lately, given the pressing need to teach larger classes, but I still offer students in my classes the opportunity to submit drafts of their papers and receive feedback. Since my last TFR, and giving staffing constraints in the developmental area, my undergraduate teaching has been limited to teaching the 3000-level Child Development—which I’ve taught continuously once per semester.

In regards to graduate education, one of my main concerns has been what I perceive as a trend towards early specialization. In my view, students’ ability to do meaningful and creative work in their area of expertise is greatly affected by the breadth of their knowledge across psychology. Therefore, whereas I focus on providing highly specialized training in my own lab, I have also made a commitment to teaching a variety of graduate seminars, so as to provide students with a broad knowledge base. The challenge of graduate teaching is, in my view, to achieve a balance between the need of students to develop an accurate and in-depth understanding of developmental theories and the need for them to develop their own critical perspective on those theories. One clear reward in teaching graduate seminars has been that, unfailingly, I have learned from our discussions at least as much as my students have. Over the years, I have developed and taught 9 different graduate seminars. In the last five years I continued teaching one of our required core classes in Social and Emotional Development, which I have recently adapted to fit the new requirement of a life-span focus; in addition, I have taught a seminar on Moral Development and developed a new seminar on Constructivism and Meaning-Making.

By far my favorite teaching activity is mentoring students. I have always involved undergraduate and graduate students in all stages of the research process and, as my CV attests, I have an extensive and successful record of collaborative publications with my students. Furthermore, I enjoy and take pride in mentoring and supporting my graduate students’ transition into becoming independent researchers, and in the last five years I have also mentored several post-doctoral scholars in the US and in various Latin American countries. Even as I continue to have extremely productive and creative collaborations with all of my former graduate and post-doctoral mentees, my primary commitment in my continued interactions with them has always been to support and enrich their own career goals and development as young scholars.