

Heather J. B. Brooks | Teaching Statement

I believe that learning should be lifelong, and every semester I teach, I look forward to accompanying the students on their academic journeys as I continue my own. While at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I have taught and mentored students from all walks of life, including first generation students, LGBTQ+ students, nontraditional students, students with disabilities, and BIPOC students. I strive to cultivate a welcoming environment for everyone, and I work hard to ensure that I am available to students for any questions, concerns, or needs that they have.

My overarching goals for students

In the sciences, I believe that the most important things for a student to learn are broad skills that are applicable to many aspects of life. I want students to exit my class with stronger critical thinking skills and more confidence when they are communicating their work, whether written or oral. These skills are crucial in science but are also important in careers outside STEM fields. Not all my students decide that they want to become researchers or teachers, so I try to make my classes applicable across different subjects and circumstances. In my classes, I provide the students with information about careers, graduate school, and gaining research experiences so that they can feel less overwhelmed about their futures beyond my classroom. In addition, I try to bring in relevant guest speakers who can talk about their careers while also providing an exciting perspective into the course materials.

My favorite courses were always those where the instructor showed us how interesting they thought the topic was. As a teacher, I aim to provide my students with the same enthusiasm. If students can find something in their classes that sparks passion, they are more likely to be retained within STEM during their time in school and beyond. When designing course materials, I like to include diverse voices to expose students to researchers and ideas that they may not have seen before, which can be especially important for students from marginalized groups that historically have poor retention in STEM fields.

How I teach and assess students

Every student learns in their own way, and I incorporate a variety of activities and assessments into my classroom to engage students with different learning preferences. I have been teaching undergraduates for four years, and I have been both a section leader for a research class and the primary instructor for a class on the development of behavior. In the former, Research Methods Lab (PSYC 294), the classes were structured around a brief lecture followed by small group work. Working in groups allowed students to practice time management and collaboration, while learning new skills important to their future academic careers, including critical reading of scientific literature and basic statistical methodologies. The assessments in this course were primarily based on group assignments, though some of the writing assignments were graded individually.

As instructor of record for the learning and behavior course, Learning and Thinking (PSYC 310), I have more control over the course activities and assessments for the students. The main course structure is predominantly lecture based; however, there are usually several activities planned for each day that allow students to engage with the course material. In each lecture, I provide students with practice questions from recently learned material that we work through as a class using the Socratic method. Students also frequently receive practice problem sets that focus on real-world applications of the course material. Students are encouraged to work through these in small groups first, and then we work through

the same material as a class. Audio-visual materials are included to break up the lectures. I especially loved the hands-on experiences that I was offered as a student, and I try to incorporate these in my classroom.

The students' learning is assessed through exams given throughout the course and shorter quizzes given every week. Students also have a semester-long project that asks them to choose and change one of their own behaviors. In this way, the course moves beyond the textbook and potentially has lasting impacts on their lives. Students complete the behavior project on their own, and instructor feedback is tailored to the student's individual needs based on their chosen study design. I also created small assignments that allow students to apply their knowledge in low-stakes ways, such as creating their own practice problems.

Future directions as an instructor

In future classes that I teach, I would like to shift emphasis slightly more away from traditional examinations to a more varied approach of assessment. I have heard from many of my students that traditional examinations induce a lot of anxiety, and I believe that students should be able to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that are not disadvantageous to them. I would like to focus more on projects and in-class writing assignments that allow students to apply the material to their lives and give them an opportunity to be creative and innovative.

I take student feedback from discussions with students during office hours and class, as well as end-of-semester student evaluations, very seriously, and I consistently try to improve myself and the courses that I teach. I have taken classes and been a part of workshops throughout my time as a graduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, to learn more about the current best pedagogical practices. I hope to continue taking advantage of opportunities like these so that I can keep evolving into a more engaging and motivating instructor.