Principle 6
Enhance student engagement and learning through effective curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment strategies.

Case Study

Associate Professor David Neumann, Senior Lecturer
School of Psychology

Do students love every topic that they study in their degree? Do some topics elicit anxiety? In my teaching I have had first hand experience that “not all subjects are created equal”. Psychology students at Griffith largely come from an arts/humanities background. Modern psychology is taught as a science and includes the “hard science” topics of anatomy and physiology as well as statistics. These topics elicit the most trepidation and anxiety. They are also the ones that I teach. My challenges are how to engage students in topics that have negative perceptions, address student diversity and to engage all students in the lecture.

For my lectures in Introductory Cognitive and Biological Psychology, I use a computerised 3-dimensional model of a brain (on the projection screen) and a full-sized plastic model that students can pass around in class to reinforce concepts via multisensory learning (visual and kinaesthetic). I teach Pavlovian conditioning, the learning of an association between a neutral stimulus and a significant stimulus. To show conditioning in action, I use interactive and novel methods including the use of balloons (and popping them!) and playing the Jaws theme music. In my lecture on Operant conditioning (learning through punishments and rewards) I incorporate various real-life examples. These are presented as vignettes in a class exercise in which students must work out the type of contingency that is operating (e.g., positive versus negative punishment).

I teach in a humorous style by using jokes, cartoons, and funny photographs. Over time, I have improved my approach by (a) making sure that the humour is relevant to what is being taught (or it distracts students too much), (b) mainly using funny photographs because they are best in eliciting laughter, and (c) evaluating the approach. In formal evaluations, I found that humour has the benefits of aiding learning, creating interest, reducing anxiety, and maintaining attention.

In 2008 I revised a tutorial program so that students wrote a research report collaboratively using a wiki. A wiki fosters independent learning because of the need to read and evaluate the edits made by other students. It also used formative assessment because the completed reports were peer assessed. The students wrote an individual report for their assignment using a different data set. As such, the assignment followed the constructive alignment of learning outcomes with assessment. In a formal evaluation, I found that the wiki approach significantly enhanced engagement with other students, cognitive engagement, and attendance at tutorials. Qualitative evaluations indicated that the wiki had learning benefits, had technological advantages, and students derived benefit from the group work.