

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Dialectical Reasoning Through Iterative Writing in Psychology

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

Through an iterative writing process, students engage in dialectical reasoning as they provide arguments for controversial topics in psychology. The professor provides a single “controversial topic” to the entire class, which includes a specific point of view. An example topic prompt provided to students could be the following: “The DSM V used for diagnosing mental illness is the most appropriate method of diagnosis.” After the prompt is given to the class, the professor guides students through a multi-part writing process that takes place throughout the entire semester. Students have approximately two weeks to complete each part of the project:

1. *Part One: Thesis*

Students are tasked with developing an argument that supports the prompt provided. So, if the prompt is that the DSM V is the most appropriate method of diagnosis, then students must gather evidence to support the thesis. Students may use any type of resources to support their argument, but are limited to only two non-peer-reviewed web sources. After gathering supporting evidence, students prepare and submit a one- to two-page paper of their argument.

2. *Part Two: Antithesis*

Students follow the same procedures they used for Part One to provide evidence for a counterargument to the original thesis. Students submit a one- to two-page paper for this part of the project as well.

3. *Part Three: Integration of Thesis and Antithesis*
Students integrate both the thesis and antithesis to develop a one- to two-page paper expressing a neutral argument about the topic.

4. *Part Four: Theory Development*

Finally, students develop an original theory about the topic. To do so, students use elements of all previous arguments to advance an alternative theory, which demonstrates that all other options were considered. In the example provided about using the DSM V for diagnosis, students may propose an alternative method of diagnosis, or they may make a case for no diagnosis at all. Students work alone on each phase of the project, but they do have an opportunity to share their ideas in class through a group discussion facilitated by the instructor.

How to Prepare for This Innovative Teaching Practice:

The instructor will select a series of controversial topics relevant to the discipline that can be used for the assignment. Other examples of topics used for the psychology course are nature versus nurture, therapy for homosexuality, and use of electroshock therapy.

How to Ensure Participation in This Innovative Teaching Practice:

Taking a unique approach to ensure that students are engaged in the class, the discussion, and in each phase of the project will help to ensure participation in this innovative teaching practice. Some examples of ways to develop better relationships with students include taking the time to get to know each student, using humor often in the classroom, making eye contact and interacting with each student, and memorizing notes in order to allow the professor to move around the classroom freely. Sharing fun rhymes and raps with the class may also lighten the mood. Wearing different colors such as bright pink may also help set the tone for the class on days when the professor really wants students to think.

How to Ensure Participation in This Innovative Teaching Practice:

“I start class on the first day by telling students ‘You think I won’t faze you, but I will shock and amaze you!’”