

My philosophy toward teaching is to promote knowledge, encourage critical thinking skills, and enhance mastery experiences. I aim to develop an open, collaborative atmosphere in my courses and seminars, where students learn to question the material, develop hypotheses, and learn ways to test them. For the last few years, I have been teaching PSY 802: The Psychology of Death, Dying, and Bereavement, which is open to students who have taken at least one introductory psychology course. Enrollment has ranged between 150-190 students per section, who come from a diverse range of departments and schools across Ryerson, such as nursing, social work, child and youth care, early childhood education, biomedical sciences, arts and contemporary studies, and midwifery. Specifically, over half of the students enrolled in PSY 802 were majoring in disciplines other than psychology. Of those students, approximately 40% were from social work, 20% were from early childhood education or child and youth care, and over 20% were from nursing. Providing both content and learning experiences that meet the needs of students from such different backgrounds has been a priority since the first semester of teaching this course, and I have increasingly challenged myself to advance my instructional approaches. One way I do this is by maintaining currency in both clinical and health psychology. Each year, I examine the scientific literature for new information that has advanced the field, and think about the practical applications of those findings for my courses. Moreover, I am extremely active in my professional societies (in both clinical and health psychology) and therefore have access to the newest research findings by attending meetings, workshops, and conferences. Not only do I seek to disseminate the most up-to-date information (e.g., Ontario laws and regulations around assisted suicide end of life care, or body disposition) but I actively pursue activities that will allow me to provide novel educational experiences in my course. For example, I have attended “Death Cafes,” hosted by the Home Hospice Association, which are open, organized events in the community that allow interested members of the public to discuss issues around death and dying. As this is covered in the course material, I have had organizers of the Death Café come and speak to students in PSY 802 about the concept and experience. Consequently, several students have attended Death Cafés in Toronto. They report that they found attendance to be beneficial and to enliven the course content.

Providing concrete and relevant learning experiences, however, is not enough. Students desire innovative ways of learning, especially in a world that is progressively electronic. As it is part of my teaching philosophy to make learning truly worthwhile, I re-designed PSY 802 using a blended learning format, which was implemented in the Fall semester of 2017. This was a completely new area for me to develop as an educator. Under the tutelage of Nada Savicevic from the Office of E-Learning, I learned about resources to develop an online course, ways to adapt visual material for the online environment, best practices for recording interactive online lectures, editing media, and building a consistent format for each online lecture. I worked assiduously with instructors from the Ryerson Office of E-Learning as well as members from the Digital Media Projects Team to realize the blended course environment. The final product included three lectures delivered online, each of which was alternated between face-to-face lectures. The goal of this blended course was to promote flexible and active learning through short online content modules (via narrated PowerPoint slides), short videos, and a comprehensive set of links to external online resources. As per best practices of e-learning, each module of online content (approximately 10 minutes in length) was accompanied by self-assessment questions and a short online quiz at the end of the class. Students provided written responses to “pause and reflect” questions throughout the newly integrated course content. In addition, students completed a mini-assignment at the end of the online class, which involved using

information from the online lecture to answer questions about a hypothetical case study, and their responses were compiled and discussed at the next face-to-face lecture.

Both the online and face-to-face lectures were highly attentive to the fact that the majority of students taking this class were not majoring in psychology. For example, the unit on end-of-life care reflected perspectives from nursing, social work, medicine, and alternative and complementary healthcare approaches critical to end-of-life decision making. Moreover, in each of my lectures, the teaching centered on equal parts of theories, concepts, and practical approaches to death and dying. This approach allowed me to engage the diverse range of students who enrolled in this course, and there was a great deal of active participation during face-to-face lectures. In addition, the online component of the course encouraged active learning and enticed students into the material outside of our regularly scheduled face-to-face lectures. Students have provided excellent feedback on the blended course. In particular, students from various departments and schools reported that they benefitted from the variety of learning tools utilized, enjoyed the flexibility of the e-learning environment, and felt the “real world” applications enhanced their learning.

In line with my teaching philosophy of collaborative learning, I have sought to share my experiences with other faculty. With my collaborators Nada Savicevic and Shelley Loader from the Digital Media Projects Team, I presented a workshop entitled “Flexible Course Design: Reflections on Transforming the Large Lecture Course through Technology Enhanced Teaching and Learning,” at the 2018 Learning and Teaching Office’s Annual Conference. This session was attended by over 80 faculty, students, and staff. In addition, for the last year, I have been a member of the Vice-Provost Committee on E-Learning Working Group, where I have been active in helping to develop planning and support for innovative teaching with technology and course re-design initiatives at Ryerson.