

Teaching Dossier

Background

My training as a sex educator began nearly 15 years when I became a volunteer peer counsellor for Planned Parenthood Waterloo Region (PPWR) (now the SHORE Centre). In addition to exploring my personal values related to sexuality, my training as a counsellor required becoming familiar with core sexual health topics, including contraceptive options, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), human reproduction, and healthy relationships. The women who trained me differed in their approaches to teaching the material, but each had incredible strengths. One taught me to be sensitive and compassionate when speaking to people about sexual health issues and the other showed me how to manage my own beliefs and insecurities related to certain topics. At that time, I was also completing my B.A. in psychology and being trained in a variety of psychology-specific topics, research methods, and theoretical frameworks. Concurrently, I began taking additional courses to add to my growing sexual health knowledge-base, including a second-year human sexuality course at the University of Waterloo. This time in my life marked only the beginning of what became my life's passion, my area of expertise, and part of my personal and social identity.

Following my time and experience with PPWR, I went on to become a volunteer sexual health peer counsellor with Planned Parenthood Toronto (PPT) and continued acquiring training and knowledge in human sexuality. I left this position in my pursuit of graduate studies. After moving to Saskatoon for graduate school I connected with Sexual Health Centre Saskatoon (now Saskatoon Sexual Health), Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre (SSAIC), and Saskatchewan Prevention Institute (SPI). With these organizations, I began to mentor and teach other volunteers about sexual and reproductive health. I also moved away from counselling and started to focus on community-based research and program evaluation in collaboration with these organizations. In addition, graduate school afforded other opportunities to mentor and teach undergraduate students in psychology courses where I was tasked as a teaching assistant (TA).

Upon entering my PhD I was advised to prepare for the opportunity to teach a full undergraduate psychology course. In the summer of the first year of my PhD training I taught PSY 227 Human Sexuality. These opportunities snowballed into additional opportunities for teaching undergraduate-level courses, including Group Dynamics and Human Sexuality.

Primary Teaching Objective

As an instructor, I value nurturing critical thinking. I strive to achieve this by encouraging students to: be active learners, and not just passively absorb information; challenge other viewpoints and be critical towards face value; reinforce their personal viewpoint with credible evidence and support; consider multiple perspectives on an issue; inquire about alternative ways of thinking and knowing; draw connections between the course material with the real world; apply what they learn to their own lives; and, allow their perspective to evolve and transform as they engage with new material. With the current job market, it is also important for students to consider diversification in their learning and skill acquisition. As such, I encourage students to develop a skill set which is wide and can apply in a multitude of career paths. I was fortunate enough to complete a graduate program, which encouraged this approach, and I would like to instill similar values in the students I teach and mentor.

General Approach to Teaching

My background in applied social psychology primarily guides the way in which I teach. My graduate program emphasized the systematic application of social psychological theories and

research methods to understand and ameliorate problems of social significance. In this program I completed courses in theory, research methods (qualitative and quantitative), and statistics. I also refined my research skills by completing three applied research placements within the community, and a research dissertation. The combination of course-based knowledge and engagement in research and community amply prepares students for research careers. While I do not expect students at a second-year undergraduate-level to be able to possess all these skills, I aim to ensure that I at least expose them to this material and provide a solid foundation through lectures and reading material. I also provide foundational training in writing psychological research-informed papers (e.g., teaching appropriate integration of research findings, APA formatting, etc.).

My teaching approach is also based on the principles of pluralism and collaborative learning, whereby people bring their senses and experiences to the learning environment and construct knowledge together. I always inform my students that while I may be well-versed in a variety of topics, I do not know everything, and I am open to learning from all of them and co-creating our educational journeys. When teaching, I also encourage students to analyze topics from a multitude of perspectives, including biological, social, psychological, cultural, political, and spiritual realms.

I believe that less productive episodes of learning occur when: there are distractions; people yell or are rude; people do not let you speak/have a voice; people are unwilling to consider others' points of view; people are arrogant; people make gross assumptions; and people blindly prioritize their point of view/agenda. In contrast, I believe that productive episodes of learning occur when: instructors considering and incorporate multiple ways of learning; instructors share personal experiences and stories with their students (within reason); students are given the opportunity to apply course material to the real world; instructors encourage students to share their experiences; and instructors provide positive reinforcement. I also believe in the power of meeting individuals where they are at and offering suggestions for campus- and community-based resources, which may aid them in their educational endeavours (e.g., Access and Equity Services, writing centres, campus peer support etc.).

Approach to Teaching Human Sexuality

When teaching human sexuality, I realize that my approach to teaching is different than if I were to teach many other psychology-based courses (e.g., Research Methods). This is for three reasons: 1) I teach sensitive subject matter (e.g., sexual assault, abortion, sexual pleasure, etc.), so I must ensure that I create an environment that invites comfort and conveys sensitivity for my students; 2) sex education dramatically varies across school boards, cities, provinces, and Canada as a whole. Many students may have been exposed to some form of sex education, but the level of quality is likely to have been low (based on various reports highlighting the shortcomings of school-based sex education). For this reason, I assume that many of my students do not know even the basics of sexual health (e.g., reproductive anatomy) and so I aim teach this material first at the beginning, but then continue to incorporate it as we move into more advanced topics; and 3) I consider sexuality to be a universal experience, but also recognize the diverse nature of it. While there are some common experiences for students (e.g., many of them will enter sexual relationships, have biological children, or endure the dark side of sexuality (i.e., sexual abuse, etc.) the ways in which these events occur and are experienced can greatly vary.

Why do I teach Human Sexuality?

I believe that sex, sexual health, and intimate relationships are universal phenomena and that all individuals have the right to the kind of education in these areas that empowers them to

make informed decisions. I consider it a privilege to hold knowledge pertaining to sexual and relational health. I also believe that I have a personal duty to share my knowledge and support people in their pursuit of sexual enlightenment. Further, I recognize that often the people with the least amount of personal rights and freedoms related to human sexuality are marginalized, often in a multitude of ways. As such, I strive to be anti-oppressive and challenge patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial assumptions pertaining to sexuality. I aim to achieve this by giving voice to marginalized and at-risk individuals in our society.

Teaching Innovation

To accommodate different learning styles, I aim to employ a variety of learning strategies including lecture, discussion, art, music, film, guest speakers, debates, role-play, and group experiential activities. One of my favourite teaching strategies is to provide “skeleton slides” where the information is incomplete. I find this to be an effective method for encouraging attendance, improving attention, and increasing investment in learning. The next time I teach a course on human sexuality, I would like to incorporate a polling/question submission website or app. This technology would allow for the submission of anonymous questions that students may be wary to ask more directly and would allow for real-time engagement during class time. By far, my favourite teaching strategy for human sexuality are weekly reading reflections. For 10% of their course grade, students are required to submit 10 reflections. They are invited to write about anything the readings inspire for them, but they are instructed not to provide a summary of the article. In response, I receive insights into topics that go far beyond the material, questions pertaining to the topics or students’ personal lives, and personal confessions. As a result, I can demystify concerns, correct faulty beliefs, offer a sex-positive alternative, convey compassion, combat shame, and recommend appropriate resources (e.g., books, websites, videos, counselling, etc.). With this approach, I have been fortunate to offer support to students with topics such as sexual violence, unhealthy relationships, abortion attainment, childbearing stigma, as well as incomplete knowledge related to sexual organs and functioning. Students have thanked me for helping them feel less alone, not shaming them for their beliefs or experiences, and giving them permission to change their lives.

Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness

The Department of Psychology at USask solicits student feedback regarding my teaching effectiveness via PTEQ forms. A benefit of soliciting student feedback using these forms is that student responses can remain confidential, and even anonymous when completed online. However, it is not always clear what students are basing their evaluations on (i.e., construct definitions are lacking, and terms are open for interpretation). Additionally, the Department of Psychology at USask switched to an online evaluation system in 2016. As such, this generally results in fewer students completing the evaluations. Further, online evaluations are debatably no more informative than websites like “Rate my Prof” which solicit polarizing evaluations (those who love or hate us). Regardless, I strive to remain humble and open to hearing what my students have to say. I also aim to incorporate constructive feedback and am always working towards improving my teaching methods.

Table 1. PTEQ scores for Linzi Williamson 2013 to 2019

TEACHING CONSTRUCT	COURSE, YEAR, SAMPLE SIZE	SCORE
Knowledge of course content	Human Sexuality PSY 227	
	2013-2014 N = 13	90
	2015-2016 N = 60	88
	2016-2017 N = 52	92
	2018-2019 N = 15	95
	2018-2019 N = 1	97
Effectiveness of course organization	Group Dynamics PSY 225	
	2016-2017 N = 1	84
	Human Sexuality PSY 227	
	2013-2014 N = 13	87
	2015-2016 N = 60	83
	2016-2017 N = 52	90
2018-2019 N = 15	93	
2018-2019 N = 11	91	
Effectiveness of course presentation	Group Dynamics PSY 225	
	2016-2017 N = 1	100
	Human Sexuality PSY 227	
	2013-2014 N = 13	83
	2015-2016 N = 60	82
	2016-2017 N = 52	92
2018-2019 N = 15	94	
2018-2019 N = 11	92	
Instructor willingness to engage in interactions with students	Group Dynamics PSY 225	
	2016-2017 N = 1	82
	Human Sexuality PSY 227	
	2013-2014 N = 13	85
	2015-2016 N = 60	79
	2016-2017 N = 52	90
2018-2019 N = 15	92	
2018-2019 N = 11	91	
Appropriateness of course evaluation procedures	Group Dynamics PSY 225	
	2016-2017 N = 1	76
	Human Sexuality PSY 227	
	2013-2014 N = 13	84
	2015-2016 N = 60	72
	2016-2017 N = 52	88
2018-2019 N = 15	92	
2018-2019 N = 11	88	

	Group Dynamics PSY 225 2016-2017 N = 1	98
Total teaching effectiveness score across 5 subscales	Human Sexuality PSY 227 2013-2014 N = 13	85
	2015-2016 N = 60	81
	2016-2017 N = 52	91
	2018-2019 N = 15	93
	2018-2019 N = 11	92
	Group Dynamics PSY 225 2016-2017 N = 1	88

Personally, I solicit feedback from students in my course final exam. For bonus points I often ask students: 1) What is something you learned in this course that really stood out? And 2) What is something you wish we had covered more in the course? By far, the best feedback I have received from students who have taken my class is that they are inspired to pursue a career in human sexuality, they gained the courage to leave an unhealthy/violent relationship, they appreciate the differences between people more, and/or they feel less stigmatized and more normal as sexual beings. I have also been thanked for providing a balanced, unbiased view of human sexuality and showing a high level of compassion for my students.

Generally, students from my human sexuality course desire more content on the topics they are most interested in (e.g., LGBTQ+ related topics, fetishes, sexual violence, sexual desire/pleasure/orgasm, healthy relationships, cannabis and sex). There are limitations to the amount of time I can spend on each topic within human sexuality, so I aim for balance in my topic coverage and offer many additional resources (e.g., websites, research articles, books, videos). Many students have also asked me to incorporate more concrete information about “how” to incorporate sexual health knowledge and develop specific skills (i.e., adopt a workshop approach to teaching). Moving forward, I would like to address this feedback by incorporating more of this style in my lectures (where possible), inviting more guest lecturers from the community, and referring to applicable resources (e.g., workshops, online content).

Psychology Faculty Teaching Feedback – Provided in 2016

A faculty member from the Department of Psychology joined my class on a day when I was lecturing very little and instead focused on facilitating a class activity. The topic was contraception and the activity involved students gathering into groups of about six then reading together a scenario outlining people who were faced with an issue related to contraceptive methods. As a group, they were tasked with developing a script or storyline for how a conversation about contraception might play out for the people involved in the scenario. The objective of this task was to allow students to use their knowledge about contraceptive methods (which they would have gained from their readings) and to figure out ways to have (what can often seem like difficult) conversations with someone about contraception. Once the scripts were completed, I invited students to share what they had come up with – they had the choice of simply reading the script or acting it out. They were also tasked with drawing a picture of the scenario, which were a pleasure to see and have described. I was incredibly pleased overall with this activity because the students came up with some incredibly insightful and creative messages.

In terms of constructive feedback, the faculty member noted that some students seemed awkward with the in-class activity at first, but were comfortable at the end. Unfortunately, the large, auditorium-style classroom that we are in made it difficult to hear all the students speak when they presented their scripts. I regularly offer the microphone to students, but many of them find it uncomfortable hearing themselves over the speakers. The faculty member suggested I have the students stand up at the front of the class to project outward to everyone in the future if they are not keen on using a microphone. She also suggested that I repeat what the students say (when possible) so that everyone can know what was said. I was glad to receive this feedback and have continued using it in my class. As for having students stand up in front of the class, I tried this and then received student feedback that it made them uncomfortable, so there is room for improvement still. In terms of positive feedback, the faculty member stated the following: the class and my lecturing (the little that I did) went at an appropriate pace; the information was clearly presented and straightforward; and the class learning objectives appeared to be achieved. With respect to my instructing style, she said that I appeared knowledgeable, coherent, and well-prepared. She also appreciated that my slides served only as an orienting point and I was able to lecture off the top of my head. I also came across as passionate about the material, which created an engaging energy in the room.