

Psych One Teaching Fellow Application (2015-2016)

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1st year Neuro PhD student in Justin Gardner's lab

Can commit to Fall and Winter

1. Why do you want to be part of the Psych One teaching team? What do you expect to gain from this experience?

As an undergraduate I worked for a few years as a facilitator for a teambuilding program (at Cornell Univ). One of the key components in that program was a peer-mentorship setup with a focus on constructive critiques. This meant that all facilitation was done in pairs, often putting more senior facilitators with newer facilitators. I was always incredibly impressed with how much knowledge and insight I gained both from facilitators with years of experience and from people who were on a program for the first time. This aspect of the Psych One teaching setup is of huge appeal to me. As a TA during my undergrad career I never received feedback and more recently as a private tutor there is nobody available to observe my interactions and help me improve. I really enjoy the process of conveying information to students, but I worry (as a tutor) that I often fail to deliver information in the simplest / most efficient format for students.

I also hope to gain some insight into the structure of class design and how to involve and inspire students to participate. It seems like Psych One has had a long history of continuous improvement and I hope I can absorb some of that experience for my own future in teaching.

2. Tell us about a class you've taken that you think was taught exceptionally well. What was it about that class that made it so great?

As a part of the introductory computer science curriculum at Cornell there is a required course on "functional" programming. The class was separated into the lecture material (which was tested with two midterms and a final) and a project component (five problem sets and a final project). Outside of the tests and projects there were no requirements, although there were optional discussion sections. Two aspects of the class stood out for me: First, the grading was always finished within a few hours (the tests ended ~7pm and the grades were returned by midnight)—this ensured that all of the questions and answers and issues were still fresh in mind when you got feedback, letting students learn very quickly from their mistakes. The second fantastic aspect was the project. Each semester the project was a game in which pairs of student submit code for a "bot" that competes against the other students' bots. See [here](#) for some examples. We spent

easily a hundred hours on the project working with the TAs to optimize code, going back through lecture notes to tweak algorithms to improve them, and generally having fun while learning how to program. The final project day, a four marathon bot vs. bot session, remains the only “exam” I’ve ever been to in which all of the students were cheering and yelling—it takes a particularly successful class design to pull that off.

3. What do you think should be the goals of an introductory psychology course? What do you hope your students would gain from their experience in this course?

Psychology has become very mainstream in the last few years and there seems to be an increase in the amount of coverage of individual studies, often controversial ones and without much context or opposing views. I think that a course in psychology today has to indirectly deal with this issue: students need to be able to assess the validity of a finding without relying on the simplified versions that appear in the news—referring to their own knowledge of the history and context of psychology as well as having the ability to dig deeper into the literature directly. In addition, I think that an intro class should give students a taste of what research is actually like. Practical experience can be valuable here both as a participant in other researcher’s experiments (to get some breadth about possibilities and to see research in action) but also from a conceptual point of view by designing their own experiments to test interesting hypotheses.

I would hope that a student leaving my course would have both an appreciation for the significant findings that have occurred in the past but also the considerable hurdles that were overcome in collecting those data. I also want them to be excited! Psychology is just now beginning to integrate more heavily with neuroscience and computational methods. This is a fantastic time for people to come into the field with diverse backgrounds and collaborate on projects with more depth than was previously possible.