An informative activity for the beginning of new semesters is to have students define what psychology is in their own words. What one will presumably find is that students may not see psychology as the diverse and scientific discipline that it is. As a teacher and researcher in the field of psychology, one of my main goals is to encourage others to challenge their existing views regarding what psychology entails. While my teaching objectives are tailored for each course, depending upon the foundational knowledge and abilities of the students, helping the students to understand the true nature of psychology is a goal that I attempt to achieve in all course levels. This task is the most challenging in introductory psychology, which is a popular general education course for many students. For many of these students, Freud’s ideas are still current and information from popular press websites is credible, but I try to teach them that they can and should challenge these ideas and attempt to seek scientific evidence for their beliefs.

With a research specialization in judgment and decision making, I am aware of how cognitive biases hinder people’s ability to deviate from their existing views, but having an analytical nature is a skill I hope to instill in all of my students. A useful activity that I incorporate into my Research Methods course is a “comparison of views” paper in which students pick a topic of interest and then discuss how their views on the topic differ when based upon three sources: personal experience, a popular press article, and an empirical psychology article. In addition to encouraging students to challenge their existing ideas that are likely based upon anecdotal evidence, this type of activity has numerous other benefits, including introducing students to imperative researching necessities such as how to perform a literature search, how to read an empirical article, and how to develop a well-formed opinion supported by scientific statistics.

Just as I encourage students to have an analytical nature in their everyday lives, I attempt to have them follow that same motto in my classroom. This intertwines with my second pedagogical goal, which is to create an interactive learning environment in which students feel comfortable asking for clarification and challenging me when necessary. This type of interaction is the source of some of the most stimulating and insightful discussions that occur in my classroom; I am consistently impressed with the quality of student comments and debates. In addition, this type of interactive environment facilitates a bidirectional learning atmosphere where I am continually pushed to learn and grow as an instructor, as well as a lifelong student of psychology. I begin each class with “Questions from Last Time” where I provide answers to challenging questions they raised during the previous class, which in turn allows me to continually readdress the process of how to find scientific evidence for questions. The interactive environment is further fostered with group discussion and activities, which is a teaching method I incorporate into all of my classes, whether they are medium to large introductory courses or smaller upper-level courses. Incorporating several group-based activities throughout the semester, such as discussing the numerous operational definitions they can create for the same word or the various ethical concerns in psychology experiments, allows students who struggle with course content to learn from their peers and to be exposed to diverse perspectives, thereby highlighting the importance of group collaboration as a vital stepping stone to personal achievement.

Lastly, I try to inspire my students to develop enthusiasm for the course material by demonstrating my passion for the subject matter. While I incorporate numerous activities, I also believe that lectures are an integral part of higher education. Because it can be difficult to keep students engaged, I put a great deal of effort into making my presentations as appealing as possible. I continually revise my lectures based on a Lecture Log, which helps remind me of topics that I need to improve upon in future semesters. Because psychology is so wonderfully diverse, there is the potential for most students to find inspiration somewhere within the field. Even if they do not share my interest in cognitive psychology, I strive to make them aware of the other types of psychology that exist. Whether it is in a research-based lab setting where I have trained students how to run psychology studies and interpret data or in one-on-one meetings where I have discussed the various opportunities available to students interested in learning more about psychology, mentoring students is one of the most rewarding components of my job. I find it exhilarating to have the chance to expose students to new ideas and new ways of thinking and I value nothing more than when students inform me that they have chosen to continue to study psychology at the undergraduate or graduate level.