



# Teaching Psychology in North America: Four Case Examples as Cautionary Tales Introduction to the BISTOPS 2022 Special Section

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## Abstract

The articles and commentaries in this special section of *Human Arenas* are based on presentations by four invited speakers at the 2022 Biennial International Seminar on the Teaching of Psychological Science (BISTOPS; [www.bistops.org](http://www.bistops.org)). BISTOPS is designed to give 25–30 invited psychology teacher/researchers the opportunity to spend five days in Paris discussing research on various aspects of teaching psychological science, to exchange new research ideas, to create international research teams, and ultimately to generate empirical studies whose results will lead to evidence-based recommendations for promoting excellence in the teaching of psychology. Though written by North Americans about teaching psychology in North America, the articles are relevant for the teaching of psychology, and other disciplines, in many other parts of the world. That is because they deal with thorny questions about what teaching methods lead to the greatest long-term retention of new knowledge, about how we can disabuse our students of the misconceptions they bring with them to our courses, about whether and how we should try to protect students from potentially upsetting course content, and about how best to evaluate the quality of our teaching.

**Keywords** Teaching psychology · Teaching evaluations · Misconceptions · Trigger warnings · Desirable difficulties

The authors of the articles in this special section of *Human Arenas* recognize that teaching effectively—that is, in ways that best promote student learning—is a challenge regardless of what one is teaching, or where. Research based on student and faculty surveys, classroom observations, and measures of student learning has consistently shown that effective teachers tend to have certain instructional skills and personal characteristics and employ certain elements of course design. More than 100 specific variables have been identified, but factor analyses show that they boil down to a much smaller number of particularly important ones. These include (a) being knowledgeable and enthusiastic about course content, (b) giving clear and organized classroom presentations, (c) providing challenging

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learning tasks, and (d) developing rapport with students and encouraging interactions among them (e.g., Buskist et al., 2002; Keeley et al., 2006; Murray, 1997; Schneider & Preckel, 2017). In other words, effective teachers know what and how to teach and show that they care about their teaching and their students (Bernstein et al., 2020).

These are the principles around which I organized my graduate teaching assistant training program when I was the director of introductory psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign from 1984 to 1998. I paid particular attention to the idea that the four main parenting styles identified by developmental psychologists (Baumrind, 1971) have their counterparts in the classroom (Barnas, 2000; Barrett, et al., 2007; Bassett et al., 2013; Rogers et al., 2017) and that, like parenting styles, these four main teaching styles tend to have differing consequences (Bernstein, 2013, 2021).

The *permissive-neglectful* style, for example, is seen in teachers who deliver the same lectures year after year, discourage questions, and minimize student contact, while at the other extreme, *permissive-indulgent* teachers tend to be so deeply involved with their students that they think of them as children who need help and support in the form of study sheets, lecture notes, and rewards for attending and participating in class and completing assigned readings. Teachers who fit the *authoritarian* profile are as uninvolved as permissive-neglectful teachers but are also preoccupied with enforcing strict discipline. Like authoritarian parents, they offer students little or no opportunity for discussion, argument, or questioning. They expect high achievement and reward it with good grades, but they do not nurture it through personal attention or encouragement.

My focus was on helping graduate students develop a fourth, *authoritative* teaching style that, like authoritative parenting, tends to bring out the best in students. This style features involvement with, and caring about, students along with firm but fair discipline and grading policies that reward outcome, not effort. Authoritative teachers see students as responsible adults, so although they are willing to help, they are careful not to create dependency or to let themselves be exploited or manipulated. They reward academic success with praise as well as high grades, they encourage students to try harder when they need to, and they grant requests for special consideration only when justified by confirmed conditions or circumstances, and in accordance with institutional policies. They think carefully about their rules and standards, announce them in advance, explain why they are necessary, and enforce them consistently (Baker et al., 2009; Bernstein et al., 2020; Walker, 2009).

I emphasized that the inherently uneven distribution of power in the student–teacher relationship allows teachers to do these things, but that teachers must guard against abusing their power through unkindness, favoritism, capricious grading, unannounced changes in requirements, or other authoritarian practices. This was an important point then, as now, but in the years since I left Illinois, the direction of unbalanced power in academics appears to have reversed. Theoretically, today’s professors still have the power to decide on course content, teaching methods, grading policies, and the like, but they must use that power more carefully, and at their peril. One observer of the changing balance of power described teaching in higher education today as “an exercise in avoiding a tripwire” (Pettit, 2023). Where students once automatically accepted their teachers’ decisions about what material is presented in class, how it is presented, and what course requirements will be, they are now ready to pounce on any perceived transgression of their right to be supported (coddled?) and kept safe from anything that might upset them (Kimble et al., 2023; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Indeed, teachers who adopt an authoritative style by setting high standards for student performance and

holding students responsible their performance might be perceived today as oppressive, abusive, or even racist (Bloch, 2023; Gannon, 2023; Jack & Sathay, 2021).

This situation is turbocharged in psychology classrooms in North America, where teachers of psychology face special challenges. For one thing, compared to students who are taking courses in, say, microbiology, history, or anthropology, many if not most psychology students begin their studies thinking that they already know a lot about the field. So part of the psychology teacher's job is to help them unlearn their misconceptions. That job is not easy, and in some cases, appears impossible (e.g., Cameron & Khanna, 2023). Furthermore, there lurks the danger that challenging students' misconceptions might be seen by some of them as oppressive. For example, things may not go well when you explain that the visual or auditory "learning styles" that most students believe they have are merely learning preferences (Pashler et al., 2009) and that to be successful, students must be able to learn via multiple sensory modalities. Explaining that you are not going to adjust your teaching methods to match a student's request to do so might offend that student's sense of entitlement and generate a formal complaint. Students may be equally distressed when teachers of psychology apply the science of memory. By giving cumulative rather than blocked examinations, presenting information out of sequence rather than in isolated blocks, requiring students to engage in spaced practice and repeated information retrieval, and incorporating other kinds of "desirable difficulties," one sets the stage for student dissatisfaction, even though these practices promote more efficient learning and greater long-term retention (Yan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, psychology courses include so many topics that might upset or offend students that the classroom can easily become an academic minefield. Imagine trying to teach about prejudice and discrimination, group differences in intelligence, gender differences in almost anything, the origins of sexual orientation and gender identity, gender roles, the causes of crime and the bases of aggression, the nature of behavior disorders, and the prevalence of suicide without upsetting or offending at least one student who will complain to campus administrators, if not social media and the press.

The potential for backlash is further increased for teachers who deviate from traditional narratives about these potentially distressing topics by including multiple interpretations of classical research in psychology. For example, questioning textbook conclusions about research on recovered memories of childhood abuse, the inevitability of psychological damage following such abuse, racial bias in tests of intelligence, and the dangers posed by playing violent video games can be upsetting to students who—based on what they have heard in other courses and the media—believe those conclusions to be undeniable (Bartel, 2023; Ferguson et al., 2018). Asking students to reconsider their prior beliefs and to think critically about whether to change them can be unacceptably distressing for some individuals, especially at institutions where protection from uncomfortable experiences is baked into departmental and administrative policies.

The most obvious illustration of the reversed balance of power faced by teachers in psychology (and other disciplines) appears in the way that administrators use student evaluations of teaching (SET). SET originated as confidential advice aimed at helping teachers improve their teaching, but now also serves as a major factor in decisions about teachers' pay, tenure and promotion, and retention (Uttl, 2023). Teachers want to keep their jobs and administrators want to keep students enrolled, so both groups do what they must to keep students happy. Worries about unfavorable student evaluations and other negative consequences lead many teachers to create classroom atmospheres where "safety" means protection from discomfort of any kind. In some places, it has become too risky to ask students to face the intellectual challenges, self-questioning, and intellectual turmoil that used to be

the hallmarks of higher education. To mitigate that risk, some psychology teachers have simply stopped covering certain potentially “dangerous” topics (Pettit, 2023). And they are not the only ones affected by such worries. Recent surveys have consistently found that more than half of students in psychology and other disciplines in North America say that they routinely avoid expressing their opinions in class for fear of peer ostracism, especially if they hold what would be a minority position on some topic (Adedoyin, 2022; Drapeau et al., 2022; Zahneis, 2023).

In short, the reversed balance of student–teacher power threatens to transform psychology classrooms from the vibrant venues they should be into chambers characterized by bland lectures and stilted discussions during which students and teachers feel safe but may not experience much intellectual growth or teaching satisfaction. This is sad because there was a time not so long ago when a teacher who presented the standard narrative about research on, say, the alleged dangers of violent video games might have been asked by students who play such games about matters of correlation vs. causation. The question might have prompted the teacher to lead a discussion of alternative interpretations, to think more deeply about the research, and perhaps to revise next semester’s lecture notes accordingly. However, if the data presented in Bob Uttl’s article in this special section accurately portray the future of higher education in North America, thanks to the weaponization of SET and the other factors addressed in the section, the likelihood of such a scenario will soon hover around zero. Legal and other efforts are underway to counter suppression of free speech in higher education (and elsewhere), including those exerted by the Council on Academic Freedom (<https://sites.harvard.edu/cafh/>), the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (<https://www.thefire.org/>), and the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism ([https://www.fairforall.org/?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.fairforall.org/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)), but if they fail to alter that future (e.g., Pettit, 2021), presenting and candidly discussing challenging material will become too risky for teachers and students alike. Will the forces supporting the currently reversed student–faculty power dynamic in North America remain in place? Will they lead to the same imbalance in other parts of the world? It is anybody’s guess.

**Author Contribution** Douglas Bernstein wrote the article.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** Not applicable.

**Competing Interests** The author declares no competing interests.

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