

Teaching and learning through asking basic disciplinary questions: Examples from developmental psychology

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Abstract. This paper offers an approach to teaching developmental psychology that is based on the position that developmental psychology does not consist of a static set of facts about phases and stages. Instead, developmental psychology is a process of inquiry that is shaped by individual and cultural values. The current pedagogical approach is also based on the position that teaching and learning require active participation by students and instructors. These conceptions lead to structuring classes in terms of “Basic Developmental Questions.” Asking questions provides a way for students to become actively engaged in class, and to consider different perspectives in developmental psychology. It further encourages students to take questioning attitudes themselves. The “Basic Developmental Questions” are explained, and the applicability of the current approach to any psychology class is considered.

I.

Teaching and studying undergraduate developmental psychology can be daunting. Developmental psychology encompasses various domains of human functioning, including cognition, social behavior, language, emotion, and self-conceptualization. These domains have become separate sub-disciplines of psychology, and psychology departments typically offer individual semester courses for them. Discussing development for even a few of these domains is a huge undertaking, especially in a lifespan developmental psychology course. In addition, students of developmental psychology must deal with the complexities of how development happens, all in relation to the varied domains of functioning. Given the breadth of issues addressed by developmentalists, it is perhaps not surprising that undergraduate textbooks are overflowing with information. They can be utterly overwhelming. A framework is needed for efficient organization of course material. In this paper, I discuss how the organization of a developmental psychology course can be derived from a framework of interrelated conceptions of development and developmental psychology, as well as of teaching and learning in general.

First, I proceed from the position that developmental psychology does not consist of a static set of facts or body of knowledge about what happens to people during the lifespan. Instead, developmental psychology refers to a process of investigation through which varied questions about human functioning are addressed. Thus, teaching and learning about developmental psychology involve considering the questions that developmentalists address. In addition,

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conceptualizing developmental psychology as a *process* of investigation emphasizes the point that developmental psychology is something that people *do*. As a human endeavor, developmental psychology is shaped by the values and assumptions of individual developmental psychologists, who live in particular sociocultural contexts. Thus, teaching and learning about developmental psychology entail considering the individual and cultural presuppositions about development that permeate developmental theories and research.

Second and in keeping with the theoretical framework of this journal, I proceed from the position that teaching and learning are interactive processes that require active participation by both students and instructors. Moreover, teaching and learning are constituted by interactions among people who come to class with pre-established values and assumptions about human functioning. As a participant in this process, I, as the instructor, also come to class with values and assumptions about human behavior, as well as about learning and developmental psychology. Thus, teaching developmental psychology proceeds from my own presuppositions about development, and involves challenging students to reflect upon and refine their own assumptions about development. One of my key goals is for students to leave class better able to ponder the complexities of human behavior, as well as the developmental issues that they will, no doubt, encounter beyond the walls of one particular class.

The basic conceptions mentioned above suggest a framework for structuring developmental psychology classes in terms of some “Basic Developmental Questions.” The pedagogical properties of questioning are manifold and using questions proceeds first from the position that teaching and learning are interactive processes. Asking questions to facilitate learning is informed by the Socratic tradition and provides a way for students to become actively engaged in the class. Through questioning, one can examine how various developmentalists answer them, while simultaneously encouraging students to respond from their own perspectives. Students’ answers then become a source of further discussion, enabling active participation in a guided process of learning about developmental issues. During the course of the semester, students can be challenged to consider the implications of their and others’ answers to the questions, thereby engaging in an ongoing learning process. Further, they can be challenged to provide evidence for their claims. Engaging students with questions also provides them with opportunities to take questioning attitudes of their own that can be used in multiple settings. Ultimately, I believe that both individual and social progress is to a great extent based on the ability to ask questions and answer them rationally. I do not presume to think that my classes can change individual lives, let alone the world. But I do my best to contribute microscopically through teaching developmental psychology in a way that promotes rational inquiry.

Asking basic developmental questions proceeds from the position that developmental psychology does not consist of a static body of facts or knowledge about what happens to people during the lifespan. Instead, developmental psychology is concerned with conceptualizing and investigating foundational issues regarding human development. Additionally, there is not a singular way to think about development, and thus there may be many ways to answer basic developmental questions. The nature of the answers will depend in part on a particular developmentalist’s theoretical approach to development and his/her specific research agenda. For example, Piagetian, Vygotskian and information processing approaches to cognitive development are derived from different theoretical orientations that lead to different research enterprises. The consideration of diverse ways of answering basic developmental questions provides opportunities to think about different approaches to and presuppositions about developmental processes in a systematic way.

Although I argue against teaching developmental psychology as a series of facts, another value that informs the current approach is the view that some basic content is important for students to learn. For example, I think that students should know about Piaget and the basic claims of

30 Learning through basic disciplinary questions

his theory. In order to facilitate thinking and discussion, there must be some content to think about. Once this concrete content has been understood and learned, students and teachers can employ questions to think about the meaning of theories and empirical findings in developmental psychology. In other words, course content is derived from considering how different developmentalists answer the Basic Developmental Questions, as well as through considering empirical evidence for differential ways to answer the questions.

II.

Basic Developmental Questions²

With this pedagogical framework in mind, we may now consider some specific Basic Developmental Questions. I say “some” here because I recognize that there are other important questions about development that different instructors may choose to emphasize. However, I have come to focus on this particular set in my undergraduate classes based on my own presuppositions about what is important for undergraduates to take away from an introductory developmental psychology class. There is not a rigid order for asking the following questions because they address interrelated issues. Thus, it is often difficult to confine the discussion to one question at a time, as connections to other questions may be forged.

What is the Domain of Development?

A key developmental question to pose is, “What is the domain of development?” A domain of development refers to some aspect of human functioning that develops. On the first or second day of class, I ask students to identify some domains of development, and we end up with a list that usually includes cognition, social behavior, language, emotions, and self conceptualization. These domains are not conceptualized as naturally given. Domains of functioning are constructs used by psychologists to systematically understand and investigate varied aspects of human behavior. In addition, the domains listed above are not understood as mutually exclusive. As people go about their lives, they are not thinking at one moment, using language at another, interacting a little later, and then emoting at another moment. Even though these domains are fragmented in contemporary psychology, they represent modes of functioning that are taken to be interrelated as people engage together in varied cultural practices. Ultimately, it is important to consider how various domains are interrelated during development. For example, one can discuss how cognitive development enables children to understand others’ perspectives, which in turn, is related to advances in social development.

What is the Goal of Development?

For any domain of development, one may ask, “What is the goal of development?” Asking about goals of development proceeds from the position that teaching developmental psychology is not about teaching a set of facts. Instead, as a process of investigation, theories and research regarding what happens to people during the lifespan are derived from often implicit values and assumptions about ideal human development (Kaplan, 1986). For example, Gilligan (1982) made this point in her critique of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, arguing that it reflects a justice orientation that revolves around the value of identifying and adhering to

² I acknowledge Nancy Budwig and Michael Bamberg of Clark University as the original sources of these Basic Developmental Questions. I do not recall the exact semester, but around 1990, they organized a graduate seminar on language development around key developmental questions. The questions used here are not all exactly the same as the ones used in that course, but the idea of addressing developmental questions is taken from it. While I hope that Drs. Budwig and Bamberg would agree with what I have to say here, it should be emphasized that I am explaining only my perspective on and use of these questions.

decontextualized principles of action that are applicable in any situation. However, as Gilligan points out, other goals of moral development are possible. She focused in particular on a caring orientation, in which action proceeds from a contextualized consideration of the perspectives and needs of concrete individuals in concrete situations.

In addition, inquiring about goals of development draws attention to the view that development is not given in the nature of things, but occurs in relation to values and expectations about human functioning. These values and expectations vary across cultures (e.g., Rogoff, 2003), as well as across individuals within cultures (e.g., Turiel & Wainryb, 2000). For example, research suggests that in cultures where formal schooling is the norm, cognitive development follows a trajectory towards an end of decontextualized thinking. However, in some cultures, thinking about concrete contexts is valued (e.g., Cole, 1996). To begin addressing this issue, one can ask students to think about some goals of development in their own culture, as well as in other cultures about which they may know. In addition, cultural goals of development change historically. Examples of changing gender role expectations provide an accessible way to discuss culturally and historically dynamic goals of development.

Articulating the link between development and values involves questioning beyond the mere identification of a few theoretical or cultural goals of development. For example, one could question the assumptions about human functioning on which some goal is based. One could also consider whether there are multiple possible goals of development for varied domains. Finally, one could consult empirical research to address the question of whether some goal of development is universal or culturally specific. It is possible to generate numerous further questions about developmental goals and the decision of how much further to pursue questioning is left to individual instructors. The point here is that the use of systematic questions about goals provides a way to organize developmental discussions and to address how values and assumptions enter into the pursuit of developmental psychology. In addition, questioning developmental goals provides opportunities for students to identify, reflect upon, and refine their own values regarding development.

What is the Sequence of Development?

For any domain of development, developmentalists ask, “What is the sequence of development?” The sequence of development refers to the systematic changes that take place as individuals make progress towards cultural goals of development. Usually, sequences of development are discussed in terms of stages or phases. For example, from a Piagetian perspective, the sequence of cognitive development would involve the sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages.

Further questions can also be asked about sequences of development for specific domains of development. In particular, it is important to ask whether there is empirical support for an identified sequence of development. Building on this examination, one can also ask if an identified sequence of development can be considered universal or culturally specific. As noted earlier, the position that domains of development are interrelated leads to asking how sequences of development for different domains are interrelated. For example, one could discuss how cognitive development and social development are interrelated or mutually constitutive, insofar as cognitive development makes advances in social behavior possible, and social development makes advances in cognition possible.

How Does Development Happen?

Finally, for any sequence of development within any domain of development, developmentalists ask, “How does development happen?” The issue of how development occurs is central to the field of developmental psychology. Undergraduate students often seem to come to class with a

32 Learning through basic disciplinary questions

general understanding that “nature and nurture” are involved in the process of development. However, it quickly becomes clear to them that nature and nurture are complex concepts that include a dizzying array of processes. For example, in Chapter 1 of Berk’s textbook *Development through the Lifespan* (2007), there is a section entitled “Development is influenced by multiple, interacting forces” (p. 10). The following “forces” are then discussed: age-graded influences, history-graded influences and nonnormative influences. On the same page, there is a box discussion of “resilience”, defined as “the ability to adapt effectively in the face of threats to development.” Resilience is considered to be influenced by a child’s personal characteristics, including talents and personality predispositions. In addition, resilience is influenced by a warm parental relationship, social support outside the immediate family, as well as community resources and opportunities. Also in Chapter 1, there is a box on cultural influences and one on historical influences.

Chapter 2 of the Berk text specifically addresses the “biological and environmental foundations” of development. The biological foundations section explains the workings of genes, chromosomes and patterns of genetic influence. The environmental foundations section is made up of the following sub-sections: family; SES; affluence; poverty; beyond the family: neighborhoods, towns, and cities; and the cultural context. Many of these environmental sub-sections include further sub-sections. For example, the discussion of the cultural context first dichotomously categorizes the world into individualistic and collectivistic cultures, and then proceeds to a discussion of public policies and lifespan development. In addition, embedded in the Affluence section, there is a box on “Worldwide education for girls: Transforming current and future generations.”

Between Chapters 1 and 2, it becomes apparent that answering “How does development happen?” is not at all straightforward. Efforts to address the complexities of how development happens are crucial to the teaching of developmental psychology. However, the tendency to discuss how development happens in terms of an unwieldy catalog of reified factors that are not systematically grounded in a theoretical approach to development is problematic. To organize considerations of how development happens, I turn to another major organizing tool, namely, the concept of individual, social and cultural processes. Rather than going from one aspect of nature and nurture to another in a haphazard way, one can begin with the theoretical position that development involves individual, social and cultural processes (e.g., Rogoff, 2003). Then, one can delve into a more detailed discussion of specific individual, social and cultural processes. Thus, discussing the complexities of how development happens can proceed in an organized and systematic way. Moreover, this view is derived from an overarching theoretical approach to human behavior and development, as well as evidence that supports the view that behavior and development can be understood in terms of individual, social and cultural processes. In the next section, how development happens in terms of individual, social and cultural processes is discussed in more detail.

III.

Individual, Social and Cultural Processes

Discussing how development happens in terms of individual, social and cultural processes is derived from the concept of guided participation, within a sociocultural approach to development (e.g., Rogoff, 2003). Within this general theoretical approach, development is taken to happen as an individual participates in cultural activities with others, who guide his/her activity. This brief theoretical statement encompasses individual, social and cultural processes, which in turn, address the varied nature and nurture issues presented in most textbooks.

Individual processes include the individual's own activity. As I like to tell students, development does not just happen to a passive person. The person is actively involved in his/her own development, as he/she engages in some activity and works to develop his/her skills. This kind of work may be conscious at times, but it does not have to be. For example, while a baby may not consciously decide to develop the ability to suck his/her thumb, development proceeds because the baby is actively involved in the process of positioning his/her thumb, mouth and tongue. However, an older individual may consciously work to become a better basketball player or student. This discussion also provides a good opportunity for students to think about how they contribute to their own development. In turn, such reflection can lead to promoting more active attitudes towards their own educations. In addition, individual processes include genetic processes, encompassing textbook discussions of the biological foundations of development. Individual processes may further include a person's behavioral predispositions and current patterns of behavior.

Social processes refer to interactions with other people who guide an individual's development. Clearly, during infancy and childhood human beings cannot survive, much less develop by themselves. They need to interact with other people. The idea that other people are required for development seems quite clear to most students. However, undergraduates (at least the ones I encounter) seem to have a habit of talking about the people who "surround" a developing person. They make statements such as, "A person's development depends on the people who surround him/her." Or, "Children need to be surrounded by people who care about them." However, being physically surrounded by other people is not sufficient for development. Those other people must interact with and guide the individual's development. A person will not learn how to play basketball if more expert players simply stand around that person. Children will not learn how to interact with other people, even if the most caring others in the world surround, but do not engage with them. Social development, like development in basketball, requires interaction with and guidance from others. The guide does not have to be an older person, as peer interaction often facilitates development. In some cultures, parents and other adults do not play with children. Instead, older siblings are a young child's play partner (e.g., Rogoff, 2003). In addition, there are times when the more competent guide is younger than the developing individual. For example, a grandchild may guide his/her grandparent in the use of computers.

Cultural processes include a group's shared, as well as contested beliefs, values, and guidelines for behavior. Although developmental textbooks now incorporate cultural issues, many continue to dichotomously divide the world into individualistic and collectivistic cultures. However, much recent theory and research suggest that this dichotomy does not adequately characterize the diversity and complexities of the world's cultures (e.g., Raeff, 2006). Thus, it is necessary to consider varied indigenous cultural beliefs, values and guidelines for behavior. Cultural activities refer to the customs or patterns of activity that reflect those beliefs, values and guidelines for behavior. For example, the "great American pastime" of baseball is a cultural activity because it is supposed to reflect several American values, such as teamwork and sportsmanship. Students often think of culture in terms of food. However, the culture of food does not lie only in the specific kinds of food that are eaten, but in the value laden activities that involve food. Eating is a time to engage with others in culturally specific ways. Cultural activities are also made up of culturally specific objects. For example, in different cultures, children may play with different physical objects. Cultural processes are further intertwined with socioeconomic status and ethnicity, as well as laws and public policies.

It is important to point out that individual, social and cultural processes are conceptualized as interrelated or mutually constitutive. For example, individual and social processes are interrelated because guidance from others is ideally structured in relation to a developing person's individual abilities. Social and cultural processes are inseparable because social interactions are structured in relation to cultural norms and standards. At the same time,

34 Learning through basic disciplinary questions

cultural norms and standards are constructed by individuals as they interact. Furthermore, people construe cultural ideologies in individual ways, which can ultimately serve as a source of cultural change. Although individual, social and cultural processes are mutually constitutive, it is possible to make some distinctions among them. As such, considering the interrelations among these processes provides an opportunity to enhance students' understanding of the complexities of how development happens.

The consideration of how development happens in terms of individual, social and cultural processes is further derived from the framework that informs the current approach to teaching developmental psychology. That is, considering individual, social and cultural processes is based on the position that developmental psychology is embedded in values and assumptions, and that teaching developmental psychology involves examining those values and assumptions. For example, by emphasizing the importance of social interaction with others, students are challenged to make explicit and then go beyond the assumption that people develop simply by being "surrounded" by others. In addition, when confronted with the developmental experiences of diverse cultures, students have the opportunity to question their own culture's values about development. In turn, they can be challenged to construct their own perspectives on those values. As they refine their own perspectives through class discussion, with each other, as well as the instructor, they can also begin to discern how individual values may contribute to development.

IV.

Applications

The Basic Developmental Questions and the position that development occurs through individual, social and cultural processes provide a systematic framework for talking about development in multiple domains of functioning. In the following section, these organizing tools are applied to cognitive development and attachment formation.

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is a cornerstone of developmental psychology. The first step in explicating the theory is to answer the Basic Developmental Question, "What is the domain of development?" For Piaget's theory, the domain is cognitive development, which encompasses the development of thinking, learning, understanding and knowing. In addition, Piaget posited that abstract and logical thinking is the goal of cognitive development. We then may ask, "What is the sequence of development?" As noted earlier, the sequence of cognitive development is made up of the sensorimotor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational stages. Of course, each of these stages is complex and can be discussed in further detail. For example, the sensorimotor stage consists of six sub-stages that span the first two years of life. I assume that individual instructors have their own ways of elaborating Piaget's sequence of cognitive development and will therefore not go into further detail here.

As explained above, identifying goals and sequences of development leads to further questions. For example, one can inquire whether there is empirical support for a sequence of development, or whether the goals and sequences of development are universal or culturally specific. Starting with Piaget himself, innumerable studies have been conducted that provide empirical support for his theory. However, in the 1980s, cross-cultural research indicated that children and even some adults were having trouble with the assessments of cognition that Piaget and other Western researchers used. For example, the use of conservation tasks created much confusion (Cole, 1996). At the same time, researchers observed how study participants engaged in complex cognitive activities during the course of their daily lives, indicating that they had indeed reached the formal operational stage. Thus, it became clear that cognitive development is inseparable from the cultural activities in which people participate.

The conclusions from cross-cultural research point to how development occurs in relation to cultural processes, thus taking us to the Basic Developmental Question, “How does development happen?” To answer this question, we can begin with Piaget’s approach and then clarify his theory by discussing individual, social and cultural processes. Briefly, Piaget explains how development happens in terms of schemes, assimilation and accommodation (e.g., Piaget, 1953). Schemes represent an individual’s organized ways of understanding and knowing about the world. Infant schemes are action based, or sensorimotor schemes, which develop into more complex conceptual schemes through the intertwined processes of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation involves applying one’s current schemes to some new aspect of the world. Accommodation involves adjusting those current schemes and constructing new schemes based on feedback from the world. These processes can be understood more specifically in terms of individual, social and cultural processes.

With regard to individual processes, Piaget posits that an active individual uses and constructs individual schemes for understanding the world. It is the individual who applies his/her schemes to assimilate the world, and the individual also does the work of accommodating his/her schemes based on feedback from the world. As mentioned above, this work does not have to be conscious, and it most likely is not, for much of the sensorimotor stage. In addition, genetic predispositions for approaching the world in a particular way play a role in constructing knowledge of the world. The child’s particular talents and interests also contribute to setting the stage for his/her cognitive development.

Piaget is known for emphasizing individual aspects of cognitive development, and in the 1980s it was common to pit Piaget’s theory against Vygotsky’s theory, which emphasizes social and cultural aspects of development. At the same time, however, it is argued that Piaget’s theory does not preclude considerations of social and cultural processes (Užgiris, 1996). By the same token, sociocultural approaches incorporate individual processes. Thus, students can be led to think about how individual processes are inseparable from social and cultural processes, as infants, children and adolescents make their ways through Piaget’s sequence of cognitive development. This discussion also ultimately provides a segue for discussing the Basic Developmental Questions from a Vygotskian perspective.

With regard to social processes, other people may guide children’s understanding of the world in varied ways. For example, they may focus a child’s attention on salient aspects of the environment, and they may provide verbal feedback about a child’s action, as well as how to construe some aspect of the environment (e.g., Rogoff, 2003). Indeed, feedback is central in Piaget’s theory as a source of constructing more complex schemes. Thus, individual and social processes are interrelated as the developing person accommodates individual schemes in relation to feedback from others. As others guide a child’s action and understanding, they can also build on a child’s individual interests and abilities. This example shows another way in which cognitive development occurs through both distinct and interrelated social and individual processes.

Cognitive development is further shaped by cultural processes, as developing individuals construe a world that is imbued with cultural values and objects. For example, as noted above, others may draw a child’s attention to salient aspects of the environment. However, there may be cultural variability regarding what in the environment is considered to be salient. Directing an individual’s attention in culturally specific ways is an example of how cultural and social processes are interrelated in cognitive development. In addition, cognitive development happens as developing individuals engage with others in cultural activities that reflect cultural values regarding knowledge and intelligence.

Attachment

36 Learning through basic disciplinary questions

Attachment is another cornerstone topic in developmental psychology. What is the domain of development for attachment? Insofar as attachment involves particular relationships with other people, attachment is part of the domain of social development. What is the sequence of attachment development? Although increasing attention is being paid to attachment throughout the lifespan, most research has focused on attachment formation during infancy and early childhood. During this time, the sequence of development involves the following four stages: pre-attachment, attachment-in-the-making, full-fledged attachment, and the formation of a reciprocal relationship (Bowlby, 1969/1982). During the course of this sequence, different attachment patterns may emerge, including what are known as the secure, avoidant, resistant and disorganized patterns. The purpose here is not to explain these phases and patterns, and again I assume that instructors have their own ways of discussing these aspects of attachment.

How does attachment develop? Clearly, social processes are involved in attachment formation because an infant will not form an attachment to anyone unless he/she is interacting with at least one person. Accordingly, research has long emphasized the role of caregiver sensitivity in the development of attachment (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). With regard to individual processes, infants come to the world able to elicit the attention of others, at first through crying and subsequently through other means, such as smiling, engaging in eye contact, vocalization and physical movement. These abilities enable infants to be actively involved in establishing and maintaining connections to others. In addition, according to the Berk textbook, the infant's own characteristics affect attachment formation. For example, "Babies whose temperament is emotionally reactive and difficult are more likely to develop later insecure attachments" (2007, p. 201). However, if a caregiver responds sensitively to a difficult child, a secure attachment can still develop. In other words, not only do social processes contribute to attachment development, but individual and social processes are interrelated. In addition, there is increasing research that points to how cultural processes shape attachment (e.g., Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). Research shows that the secure pattern can be understood as the ideal goal of attachment development in various cultures. At the same time, this research suggests that there is cultural variability in how a secure attachment is understood and structured in parent-child interactions. There is also cultural variability in values about childrearing and parent-child relationships.

V.

Developmental Psychology and Beyond

I confess that I sometimes veer away from the questions, mostly because it is difficult to keep asking questions when students respond with blank stares. I also do not necessarily incorporate some of the details of the questions as described above into my lectures. Nevertheless, the Basic Developmental Questions provide an overarching approach to discussions of development. In addition, the concept of individual, social and cultural processes provides a way to discuss the complexities of how development happens in a systematic way. These tools are derived from a philosophy of teaching that emphasizes active student engagement and rational inquiry. They are also based on a particular theoretical approach to development, as well as my own presuppositions about undergraduate developmental psychology.

The relative generality of these organizing tools affords much flexibility, enabling individual instructors to discuss the details of development as they see fit. One can focus on certain questions over others, or use questions that are not discussed here. For example, some readers may have missed a discussion of the question, "What is development?" For the purposes of this paper, I decided to omit this question because it is addressed in textbooks and I assume it is addressed in most classes. However, one could go beyond the usual first day of class definition of development to questions that dissect how development is defined differently within diverse theoretical frameworks for development. When discussing how development happens in terms

of individual, social and cultural processes, some instructors may focus on one process more than the other two. Or, within each process, there are numerous sub-processes that instructors can choose to emphasize.

Beyond undergraduate developmental psychology, these organizing tools can be applied to other areas of psychology, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In any course, one can use questions that provide students with opportunities for active engagement and learning. All sub-disciplines of psychology have their own basic questions that can be used to organize courses. In addition, the complexities of any form of human behavior can be understood in terms of individual, social and cultural processes. Reflecting on one's teaching philosophy and goals, as well as on one's own disciplinary conceptions, can provide a framework for identifying the questions that are appropriate for any psychology class.

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