

Dr. Bill Altman presents at National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology

February 6, 2015

Dr. Bill Altman (Psychology & Human Services) presented an invited demonstration, “Create Your Own Cult: An Exercise in Social Psychology,” at the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology (NITOP) on January 5.

This demonstration, based on a class exercise Dr. Altman uses in his General Psychology course, taught instructors how to help students design their own cults. By engaging in this somewhat off-the-beaten-track activity, students can actively employ the information they have learned throughout the semester about perception, attention, cognition, memory, identity, social pressure and many other topics as they decide whom to target, how to convince them to join and how to take control. And once the cult is finished, students are often shocked by the result.

The demonstration was well received, as evidenced by the deluge of participants’ requests for materials and guidance in using this technique as an organizing principle for the introductory psychology curriculum.

He also presented an invited workshop, “Designing Rubrics to Improve Students’ Writing and Make Grading Easier,” at NITOP on January 3.

The workshop, prepared with Dr. Kathleen P. Greenberg (of SUNY College at Old Westbury, who was unfortunately unable to attend NITOP), taught participants how to design rubrics that (a) provide students with valuable (i.e., actionable) feedback that helps them become better writers, and (b) provide instructors with a means of accomplishing the task of grading students’ assignments with greater ease and objectivity.

The workshop, which drew 74 participants from across the U.S. and several other countries, began with an introduction to the use of rubrics, offering examples of poorly constructed rubrics; rubrics that are adequate, but not ideal; and rubrics that exemplify what might be considered “best practices” in providing both formative and summative assessments. Participants then engaged in hands-on design of their own rubrics.

Working with one of their own assignments, they defined specific learning outcomes, and translated them into rubrics that they could use in the coming semester, both to teach students skills, and to provide a means for objectively evaluating the skills their assignment was designed to build. Participants also learned how to use a system of assigning quality points to reflect different levels of cognitive difficulty associated with each learning outcome to ensure that the grade produced by the rubric is valid as well as objective. Finally, participants received a set of resources, to help them apply what they learned in the workshop as they develop rubrics for use in their courses.

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