

Sheedy Presentation
Jessica L. Collett
Dec. 6, 2017

Thank you, Marisel—for your kind words and your work on the selection committee, and for being such a great example of what it means to be an excellent teacher and colleague.

And thanks to all of you, for finding the time—and the energy—to come to this celebration. I know this is a busy time of year, and an awfully cold day to boot. I appreciate you being here.

* * * *

As a few of you know, one of my areas of interest is “the impostor syndrome.” This “syndrome,” also known as impostorism, is the nagging feeling you are somehow not deserving of your successes or accolades. It is a fear, most common among highly-successful people, that their achievements are the result of luck or even a mistake, and that someday they will be discovered for the fraud they are.

In my research, I look at where these feelings come from—why women, people of color, and first generation college students are more likely to have them than others—and how these fears affect aspirations, ambitions, or experiences in college and academia.

As a result, I have always thought of impostor feelings as tied to perceptions of intelligence. Am I actually as smart as others seem to think I am? Am I really good enough at math to study engineering? Do I have the brains to work at a top research institution?

On the day that I won this award, however, I turned to my husband Omar—who is here today—and said, “Now I realize you can feel like an impostor for succeeding in the classroom too!” It’s like nowhere is safe?

One critique of impostorism, though, is that it discounts the perceptions of anyone who does find you deserving. Discounting anyone is the last thing I’d like to do, so today my goal is to do my students and colleagues proud. I am going to try to give you a glimpse of what they see in me—why I am accepting this award today.

I am also going to remind myself of what I tell my students: feeling like an impostor usually has little correlation with actually being one.

* * * *

Like other Sheedy winners, I hope to give you something today that you might take with you—or what I call the Sheedy shtick—but first I want to take a moment to say thank you.

* * * *

I want to thank my colleagues and friends in Sociology and beyond—so many of whom are here today. Over coffee and lunches and cocktails, in dining rooms and the dining hall, on social media and in meetings—and in candidate dinners, lots of candidate dinners—you have been models and

confidantes and cheerleaders, offering a beautiful balance of warmth and insight. I appreciate you and what you have given, and continue to give, to me.

I am particularly grateful to Rory McVeigh, my former chair, who has believed in me and my teaching since I arrived on campus. He told me I would win this award one day and he was right, as he often is! He and Sarah Mustillo, my department's current chair, have tirelessly supported me and I am sure each played an important role in me receiving this award.

Of course, they could not have done it alone...so I also want to express my gratitude to the students and colleagues who wrote in support of my nomination. I wish more of them could be here today.

I also want to thank John McGreevy, JoAnn DellaNeva, and Essaka Joshua from the Dean's office that supports this award. Although this presentation has caused me a bit of stress, to be part of a college that devotes a meeting to a teaching award is really special. Thank you.

And finally, I want to thank my family—including Omar, who I mentioned earlier, but also my parents—who stole a poster when they were here for Thanksgiving—and my son, Baedyn. It is so special to have you here today, Baedyn.

* * * *

As any of my students would attest, Baedyn is a huge part of who I am as a teacher.

Our journey together has provided an abundance of engaging, and often humorous, examples for my classes over the years—examples that my students appreciate and that help them learn, examples they remember long after class is over.

Thank you for those moments and memories, B, and thank you for giving me permission to share them all these years—even the slightly mortifying ones. I appreciate you continuing to let me do so even as your friends and peers make their way to campus and into my classes.

For so many reasons, spoken and unspoken, this award feels like it is as much yours as it is mine.

* * * *

My graduate program included a required course on teaching. Ironically, it was taught by a faculty member who had a reputation for being a terrible teacher.

The first day of class, that professor showed us clips of great teachers: Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*, John Houseman in *The Paper Chase*, Edward James Olmos in *Stand and Deliver*. The professor then asked us to discuss their pedagogical approaches. What made them such great teachers, he asked?

We probably talked about their energy and their ability to command attention or to reach students...

Honestly, I don't remember many specifics of our discussion, but I will tell you what I do remember:

After this exercise, as I sat there captivated and ready to learn HOW these teachers were able to do this, the professor told us that, *although we were enrolled in a class on teaching*, most of what made people good teachers could not be taught. Teaching was one of those things that came naturally to some people and not to others.

What...?!

All that set-up—I mean these were the days when televisions were rolled into classrooms on carts. Multiple video cassettes were used in the making of this classroom exercise. And THIS was the take-away?! That you can't teach people to be good teachers!

I was defeated.

If there were teaching naturals, I was not one.

I was painfully shy. I not only embarrassed easily, but also had a terrible tendency to laugh uncontrollably when I was self-conscious.

In this teaching class, we were required to give a short, videotaped teaching demo. I learned from this exercise that I paced when I spoke, made entirely too many hand gestures, and lost all command of my native language in front of an audience.

Clearly, I thought, I was not natural.

* * * *

At the time, my career goal was to get my PhD and write textbooks while teaching at a community college. Years earlier, after a poor showing in high school, it was community college professors who got me excited about learning and who pushed me to consider a four-year school.

I desperately wanted to be a good teacher so that I could be in a position to do the same for someone else and was heartbroken to think that I might not be able to do that.

To compensate for a lack of natural ability, when it came time to teach my own class, I tried the only thing I knew to do: I over-prepared. Unfortunately, my approach was not to over-prepare with the study of actual pedagogical techniques or strategies. Instead, I spent hours creating detailed lecture notes.

My solution was basically to stand in front of my students and read scripts—scripts like the one I'm reading today, but without any attempts at humor. These scripts were 99% sociological concepts and definitions and heavily stressed quantity over quality.

I also intentionally peppered those lectures with words I didn't use in my everyday life. Things that I thought sounded intelligent or professorial. Words you might read on those "word of the day" calendars and use to sound smart.

I thought that if I acted like a professor—or, actually, if I acted how I thought a professor was supposed to act—if I did that, my students would come to see me as one and they would learn from me.

I wouldn't say that I failed miserably, but I certainly failed.

I also wore myself out. Acting like someone you are not is exhausting! Plus, teaching was taking up more time and energy than I was supposed to give it as a graduate student. If I wanted a job, something needed to change.

I decided to try something a little different. I decided to be myself.

Instead of focusing on natural abilities that I had or didn't have, I capitalized on what came naturally to me, playing to my strengths. It was a gradual transition—one I'm still making today—but it was a move toward something more authentic.

* * * *

The turning point was actually the first time I taught a course very similar to the one that I teach most often here, *Introduction to Social Psychology*.

The course is a general overview of how we become who we are—the genesis of self—and how that self engages with the world, everything from self-presentation and impression management to perception and cognition to our experiences in groups and relationships.

This class was not only directly in my wheelhouse—as my research is in social psychology—it was also a similar class that led me to grad school in the first place.

* * * *

At Winthrop University, a small teachers college in South Carolina, the class I took was called *Socialization*. There might have been 8 or 10 of us in the class. There was a textbook. I brought it here today to show you.

The professor, my undergraduate mentor, would go through the concepts from the book during class and, each day—what feels now like way too often—I would try to make the concepts come alive by sharing an example. Some from my life, some from movies or books or television, some purely fiction.

As annoying as it sounds to me now—I realize I was *that* student—my fellow students and the professor seemed to love it. I have no idea if the students did better in that class with me and my examples around, but I had discovered a skill. I could take concepts or theories that felt obscure to my peers and make them easier to understand with an example.

I actually remember an example that I brought to that class 20 years ago. In fact, I still use it in my own teaching today, so I thought I would bring it to share with you.

* * * *

Early on in any sociological social psychology course, students are introduced to symbolic interaction. [Now, this is something that I spend at least a day on, not a minute or two, so bear with me]—but symbolic interaction is a theoretical perspective, a paradigm, focused on the creation of meaning, specifically shared meaning, and its centrality in social life.

Meaning is important, as it shapes how we interact with the world around us.

For example, you might be keeping a few roughly 2.5x6 inch pieces of printed textile in your wallet. Those objects mean something to you and you're hoping that they mean something similar to the person who you try to give them to in exchange for a good or service. But the meaning of those bills is not innate and you were not born seeing them as you do now. We learn the meaning of those and other objects—including our selves, as we too are objects—in interaction. As a result, meanings can shift and change, thus changing our experience and understanding of the world.

What is significant, really, especially given the social roots of meaning, is the amount of shared meaning in the worlds we inhabit.

To summarize: we act toward things on the basis of meanings, those meanings are derived from interaction, and therefore the meaning of things can either be reinforced or change as a result of interaction.

Okay.

* * * *

So one Sunday morning in 1997, I was reading the paper. Having just learned about symbolic interaction in my social psychology course, I was struck by this Calvin and Hobbes comic strip.

For those unfamiliar with this strip, Calvin is a young boy and Hobbes is a tiger and Calvin's imaginary friend.

[read [comic](#)]

These physiological reactions Calvin describes, reactions he initially interpreted as cooties...these same physiological experiences came to be understood as love by interacting with Hobbes. Calvin's interpretation of those reactions—and his ideas about cooties and love—changed as a result of this interaction.

Now, I didn't know it at the time, but this idea of the importance of others in our interpretation of physiological sensations wasn't new. In the early 1950's a symbolic interactionist named Howard Becker actually wrote a paper on marijuana users and how a key part of becoming a regular marijuana user is learning to interpret the exact same physiological reactions that some categorize as the bad side of a marijuana high as part of the pleasurable effects of smoking it—and, Becker finds, an experienced user, perhaps like Hobbes in this strip, is key in that interpretation process.

The experienced marijuana user walks a new user through the drug's effects, teaching them to recognize them and to interpret them as enjoyable.

* * * *

Pivoting back to graduate school, when I started teaching social psychology there, I channeled my undergraduate self. Rather than lecturing from dry, detailed notes, I decided to try teaching the material using rich, relevant examples.

It was in this spirit that I started having my students play games like Chutes and Ladders and Old Maid to better understand childhood socialization and the way we learn gender roles and stereotypes.

It was also when I began hosting mocktail parties for my students. Students would bring their own non-alcoholic beverage, I would bring Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and students would mill around to chat with one another about spring break plans or what they did last weekend.

These parties were different than most parties in two ways: One, they took place in a classroom—although this semester my class was lucky that our classroom on the 7th floor of the new Corbett hall double as a ballroom—and two, I got to attach labels to students' foreheads before the party. These labels are guides for how others might treat them—labels that only those others could see, but that the students wearing them would learn affect them all the same.

I soon realized that it wasn't enough to simply teach with examples. I became a social psychologist by making those connections myself, by finding those examples. I wanted my students to feel like social psychologists too.

Learning that Howie Becker had already explored the varied meanings attached to physiological responses didn't dishearten me. It encouraged me. To think that I, as a social psychological novice, had a hint of an idea that a famous sociologist did made me feel empowered, like I could do social psychology too.

To cultivate a similar efficacy in my students I began to incorporate assignments that encouraged them to discover their own connections to the concepts and theories—what I call “examples from everyday life.”

* * * *

These assignments have taken various forms over the years.

I've had students do short, in-class presentations of examples.

I've created class blogs, where students posted a certain number of examples they saw in their day-to-day life.

This semester, to encourage students to find examples outside of the Notre Dame undergraduate bubble, students are posting media examples, with a link or a clip for others to see or experience the example.

Students like these assignments for the reasons I anticipated. They help students see the relevance of social psychology to the world around them; they hone students' ability to use social psychology

as a tool to better understand that world. The students have also found that reviewing other students' examples is an effective way to study for exams or other assignments.

I like these assignments because they give me fodder to incorporate as examples in future semesters. When a student introduces me to a clip from a contemporary television show—or at least what all the students are watching on Netflix—I can use it to replace a more outdated example in my repertoire.

Some of my paper assignments ask for examples as well. For example, just last week in my intro class, students were asked to:

Use what they had learned in a section on attraction and relationships to reflect on one of their past or present relationships. How does the social psychology fit? How does it not? What do they see differently about their relationship now that they're equipped with social psychological tools? And how might the relationship help them see social psychology differently?

I call these assignments “reflections,” and hope that in writing them students move beyond simply demonstrating that they understand or can apply the material. I push them to show that they can reflect on it—sometimes through analysis or evaluation, other times through creative connections to their life or other concepts we have covered.

I often teach large classes and reading these reflection gives me a sense of who my students are-- what they are wrestling with, what they enjoy doing, what they are excited about or afraid of. Dan Myers—a former recipient of this award—taught me that knowing my students would make me a better teacher.

In fact, when Dan hired me, he gave me a stack of books: *What the Best College Teachers Do*, *Advice for New Faculty Members*, and *Domers*.

This last one, a journalist's account of a year at Notre Dame, was invaluable. Dan gave it to new faculty members to introduce us to the university's culture in order to help us connect with our students. Over the years, examples from everyday life and reflections have served to update and enhance that picture.

* * * *

Reactions to my pedagogical approach vary.

Many are positive, with colleagues telling me how lucky I am to teach a course that translates into these real world examples—although I would argue that many courses could with some thought.

But others see my emphasis on applications or examples as trite. By asking students to think about connections to their own lives and their own worlds, critics argue that I'm feeding into students' narcissistic tendencies rather than opening them up to diverse perspectives.

I understand this opinion, but I disagree.

To make this point, I want to briefly diverge from the teaching I do on campus to teaching in another setting—St. Joseph County’s CASA program.

* * * *

Not to be confused with La Casa de Amistad, the fantastic organization Marisel discussed last year, CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates.

I am going to use my platform today to tell you a bit more about it.

CASA programs throughout the U.S. work to connect children in the court system—often there because of abuse or neglect—with trained volunteers who can advocate for those children as they navigate foster homes, new schools, and other transitions. CASA volunteers provide stability and support for children whose lives are often marked by uncertainty.

I am not a CASA—but I encourage anyone here who is looking for a way to get involved in the community to consider becoming one—instead, I am the instructor for a CASA training session on cultural competence.

CASAs work with a wide swath of people. To do this, it is important that they learn to interact effectively with people with a broad range of backgrounds or viewpoints. My job is to work with them to enhance this ability.

I have learned a number of things about cultural competence and teaching it over the years, but there are two things that I want to highlight today that relate to my teaching of undergrads.

The first, and one that appears *across* resources on cultural competence, is the importance of self-knowledge and awareness.

It is not possible to be truly sensitive to another culture until one is sensitive to his or her own and the impact that cultural customs, beliefs, and values have on individuals, including oneself.

In my session, I teach the CASAs to recognize their own culture, to see that culture is not something other people have; it’s something that we all have. To do this, the CASAs and I engage in discussion about our own culture, our own beliefs and biases, our own privilege.

It is an eye-opening, and sometimes uncomfortable, process. But, this self-reflection alongside a critical thinking technique that I also teach my undergrads—this approach—offers CASAs a tool they can take with them into their daily life. I believe this is more helpful than a collection of facts they hope they’ll remember when they encounter someone different than themselves.

That relates to a second lesson core to teaching cultural competence: becoming culturally competent is a life-long process. It doesn’t happen in a two hour training session or over a semester. It never ends. I open up and share stories of ways that I—a PhD in Sociology and the leader of this class on cultural competency for over nine years—how I am still becoming more

culturally competent every day. I encourage CASAs to remember that that's okay. If we're truly engaged, we should be learning as we move through life.

* * * *

To draw parallels between these CASAs and my students, I believe making personal connections is the foundation of a lifelong orientation toward growth and learning.

I also believe that we are at different points in our journey.

Remembering that this is the beginning of many of my students' journeys lets me meet them where they are.

I use a lot of recycled examples in my teaching. There is an episode of *Sex and the City* that I have shown just about every semester since 2005. I have to remind myself that even though I know every scene by heart and just about every possible connection to course material, it is the first time my students are experiencing it. They are learning to manipulate and maneuver ideas that are new to them—and increasingly are watching a show they've never seen before or even heard of.

Remembering that I am still on my own journey opens me up to seeing new connections, even in these sometimes tired examples.

* * * *

To circle back and tie it all together, I now realize that I began my career in the classroom riddled with fears of being an impostor.

Thinking good teaching came naturally and that I probably wasn't someone who was born with that talent made me particularly susceptible to these fears, as research suggests that impostorism is more common in domains considered to be related to innate abilities than spheres where there is widespread belief that ability can be cultivated.

My solution to these fears—over-preparation—is actually quite common among people suffering from impostorism, but it was unsustainable and ineffective.

When I stopped worrying about not being a natural at teaching and began reflecting on what came naturally to me, I became a better teacher.

Making a personal connection to teaching—like the personal connections I have my students make to course material or the CASAs to their culture—was an effective way to capitalize on my strengths.

Sharing examples from my own life—many from watching Baedyn become a social being—let me support my identities as a mother and a teacher simultaneously, fostering a holistic and authentic presence in the classroom.

At first these examples helped me teach. Soon, they helped my students learn. A few years ago, they began reaching others outside my classes when I was recruited to be a co-author on the 8th edition

of the same book that sparked my interest in social psychology in the first place. I made sure to include lots of examples in that edition.

And today...today I hope sharing these examples and my ongoing journey to teach authentically, to teach personally, gives you something to take with you, whether for yourself or to help another earlier in their teaching or research.

* * * *

I am about to wrap this up, but I have one more thing to say.

I came to Notre Dame eleven years ago, straight out of graduate school.

Like many first time faculty members, I didn't have a clue. I didn't realize how much I would miss my graduate school friends and mentors. I had no idea what the daily life of a tenure-track faculty member actually entailed, particularly all the meetings. I never considered that the "winter coat" I wore in Arizona might not get me through my first October in Indiana or that you can get tennis elbow from shoveling snow.

Lucky for me, though, I happened to land in this wonderful place that is Notre Dame—a community that welcomed me and encouraged me, a community that accepted me as I was and never once said anything about me showing *Sex and the City* in my classes, a community that offered me so many opportunities to grow and to learn. A community chock full of wonderful people.

I am so grateful to everyone who makes this Notre Dame community what it is. I share this award with all of you, as I would not be the teacher I am if I was not in your midst.

Thank you, for everything.