

# Creative Assignments and Alternative Assessment

Meredith Martin, PhD  
IEA & CTLE Lunch & Learn Series

# Who am I?

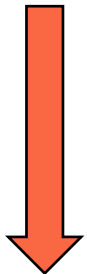
- **Meredith Martin**

- Asst. Teaching Professor
- Dept. of Psychology
- [mmartin@syr.edu](mailto:mmartin@syr.edu)

- I currently teach:

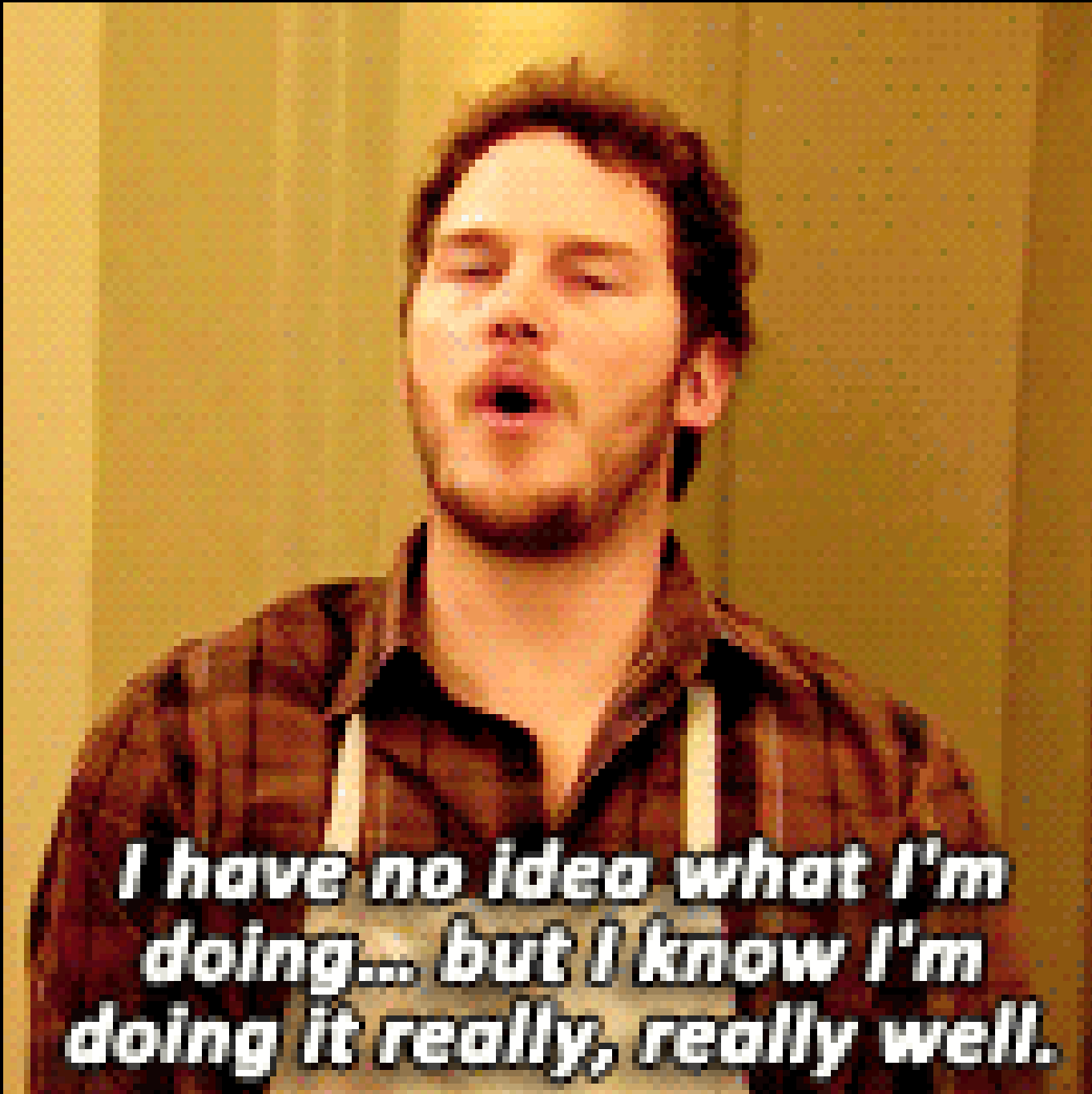
- PSY205 (Three sections of 400 students each; 12-15 TAs)
- PSY336 (60 students; no TA)
- PSY400 (25-60 students; no TA)

- My career path:



- University of Rochester - MA & PhD
- University of Nebraska, Lincoln – TT Assistant Professor
- Syracuse University – Asst. Teaching Professor





*I have no idea what I'm  
doing... but I know I'm  
doing it really, really well.*

# What is a “creative assignment” or “alternative assessment?”



- *“Alternative assessments are used to determine what students can and cannot do, in contrast to what they do or do not know.”*

<https://ctl.byu.edu/using-alternative-assessments>

# Today

1. A few rules I live by
2. The BIG research paper:  
Just don't
3. Bringing identity  
development into the  
classroom
4. Variety is the spice of life

COFFEE



A LIQUID HUG  
FOR YOUR BRAIN

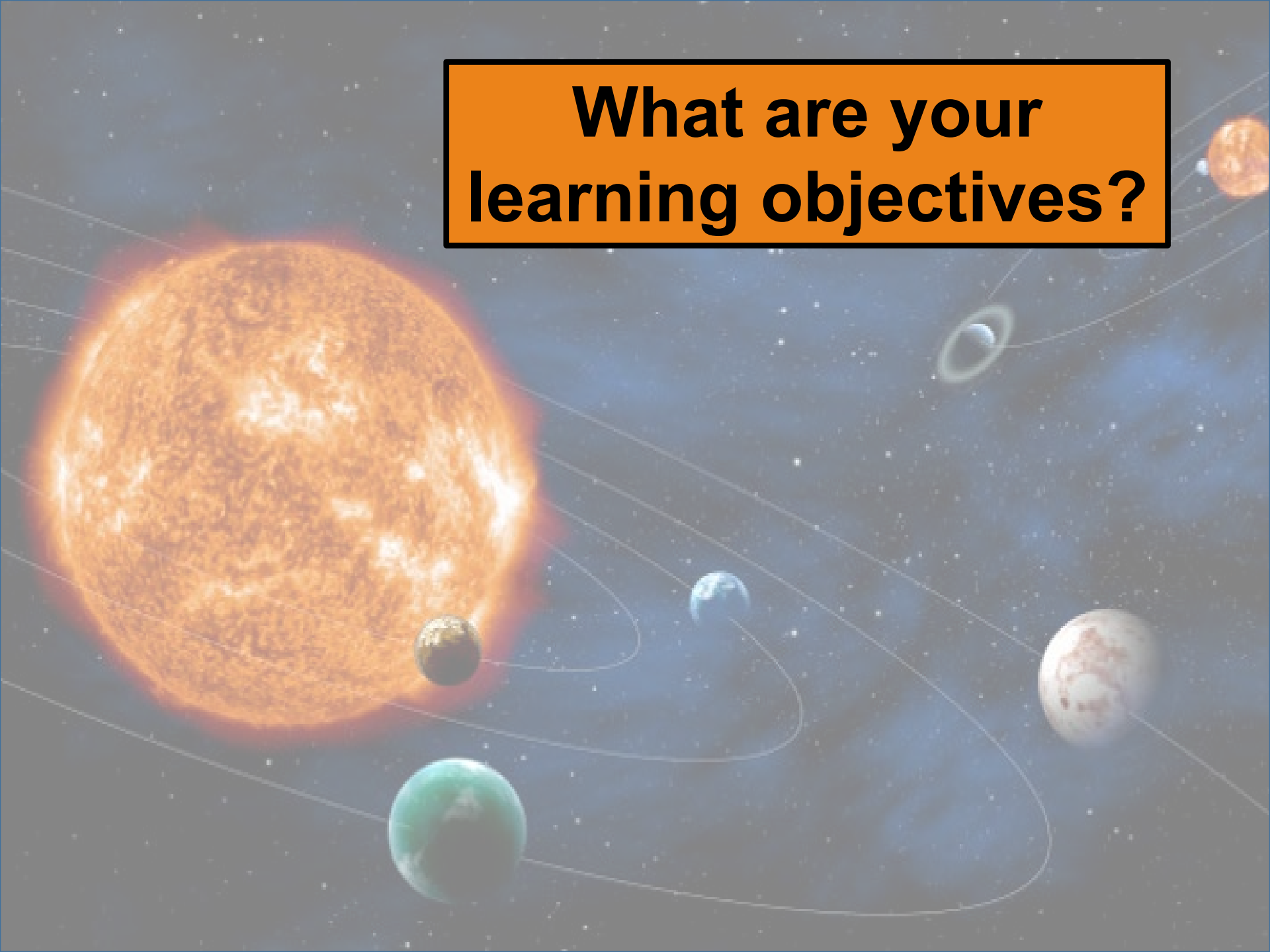




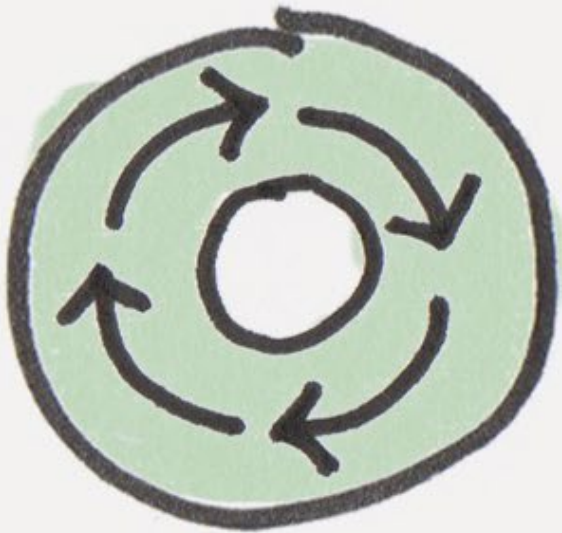


A few rules I live by...

**What are your  
learning objectives?**



Pay attention to *process*  
as well as outcome



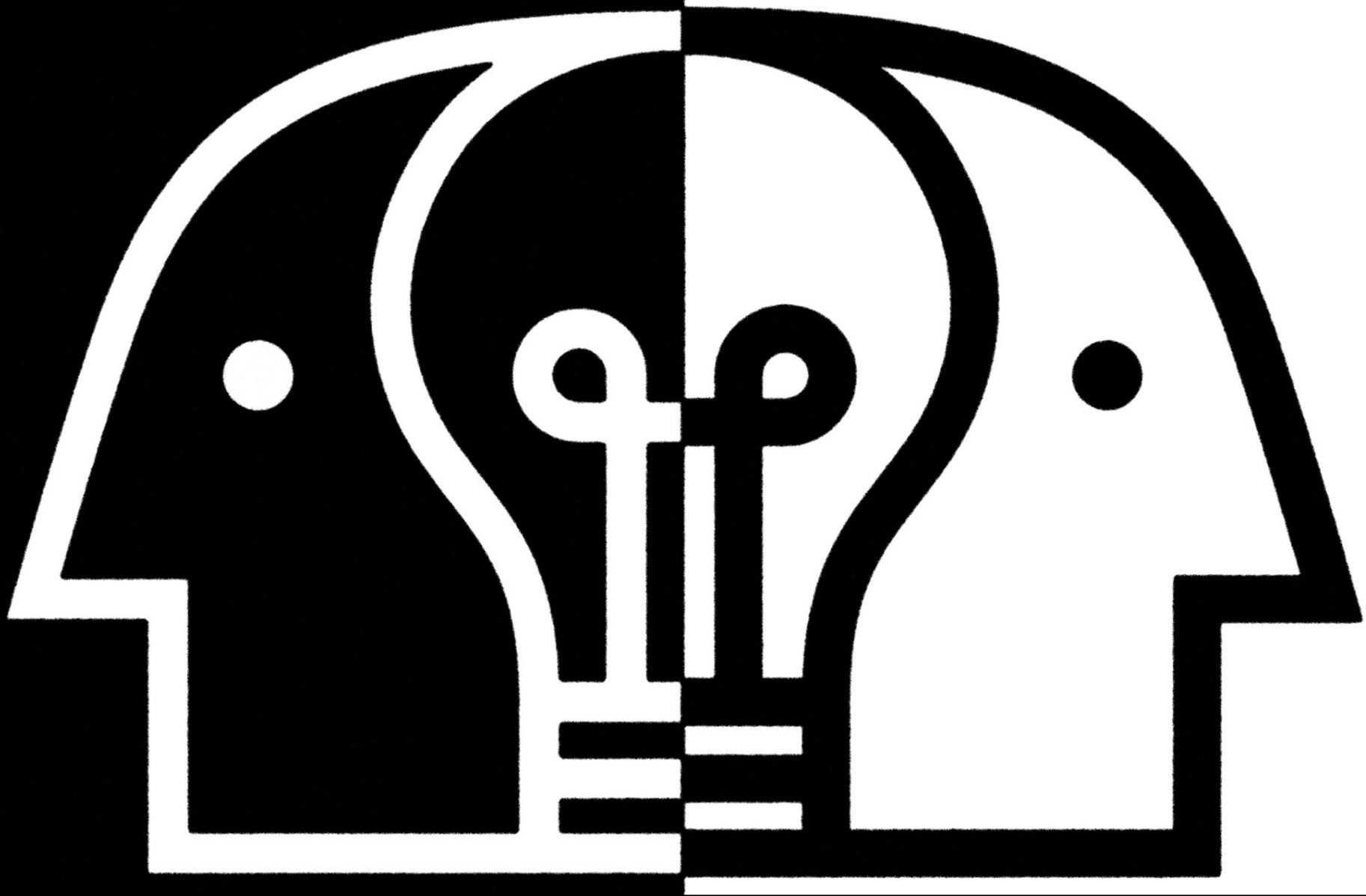
vs.







**Know your audience**



**Don't waste a great opportunity to foster  
critical thinking & cultural competency**

**Steal, liberally  
and without  
shame**



**Steal, liberally  
and without  
shame**



The two most important  
things I can tell you...



Be Realistic.



*Let it go...*

*Let it goooooo*



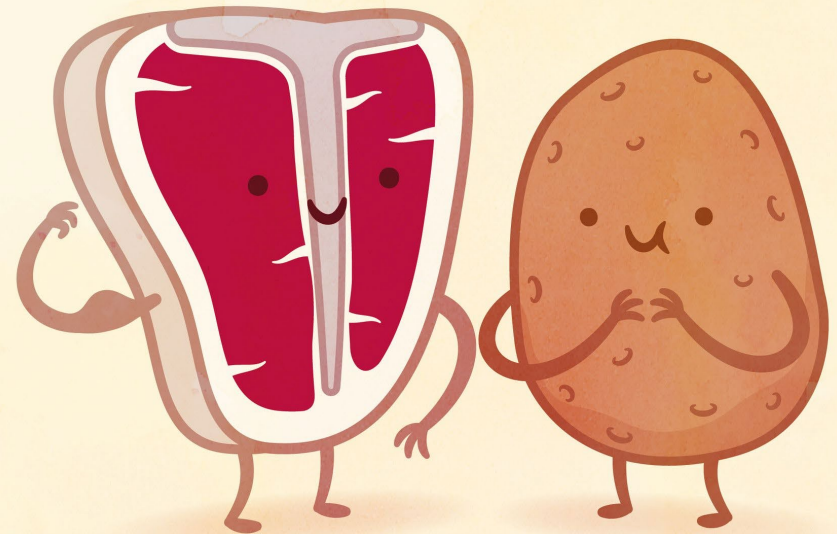


*Let it go...*

*Let it goooooo*



Ok, now to the  
meat and potatoes...







The BIG research paper:  
Just don't.

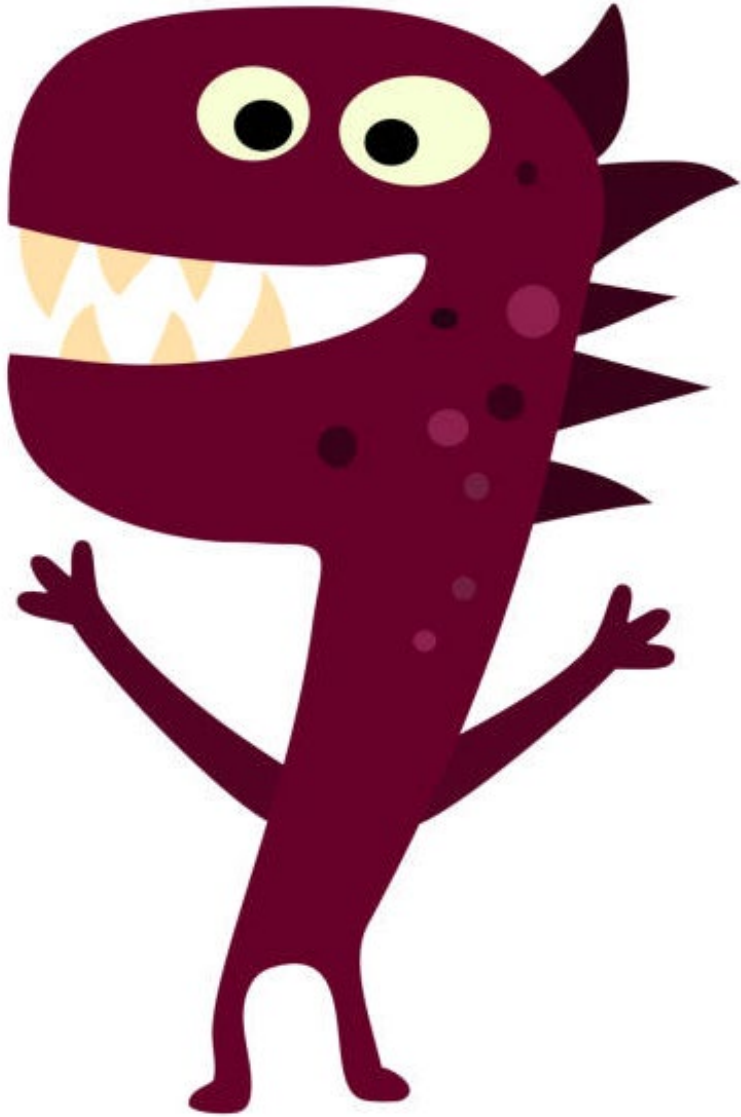


# THE BEAST



- The crème de le crème = the BIG research paper

# THE BEAST



- The crème de le crème = the BIG research paper
- Reasons to just say “no”
  - Students can’t do it (well)

# Sidebar: What it takes

## Students must be able to:

- Ask an appropriate question
- Locate & access relevant & appropriate *empirical* papers
- Distinguish between “strong” and “weak” empirical research
- Read & understand the empirical paper
- Summarize the most important points
- Critically evaluate the findings & link them to their question
- Synthesize findings from multiple empirical research articles
  - Contextualize findings from different populations/samples/theoretical models
  - Make sense of contradictory findings
  - Draw general conclusions
  - Identify gaps in knowledge
- Generate a thesis
- THEN, *maybe*, they’re ready to start writing...

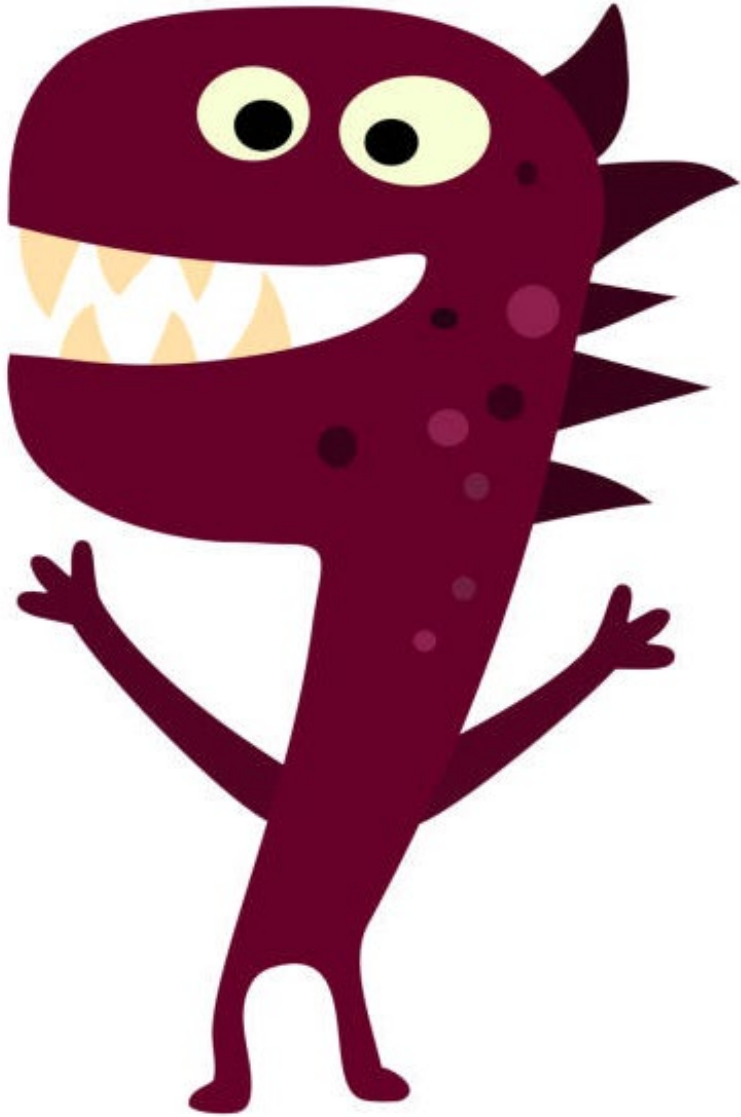


# THE BEAST



- The crème de le crème = the BIG research paper
- Reasons to just say “no”
  - Students can’t do it (well)
  - Feedback isn’t impactful
  - It’s mind-numbingly boring (for me)
  - Is it really preparing them for their future career?
  - Plagiarism

# THE BEAST



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- Reasons to just say “no”
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  - Feedback isn’t impactful
  - It’s mind-numbingly boring (for me)
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  - Plagiarism
- I am NOT arguing we ditch it altogether!



# TAMING THE BEAST

- Focus on the component skills rather than the whole



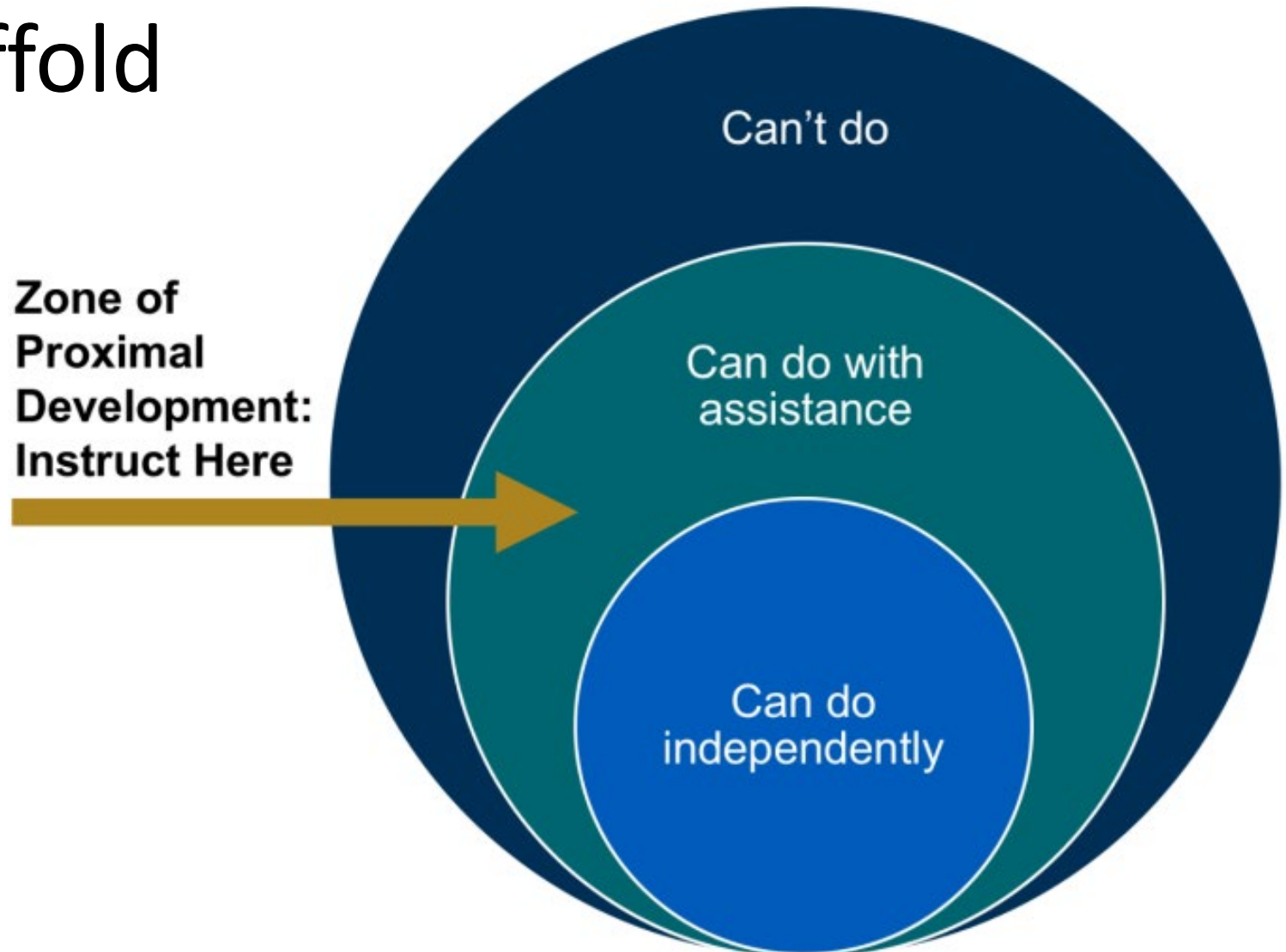
# TAMING THE BEAST

- Break it down
  - Help students be successful in the beginning to build resiliency for the more difficult parts



# TAMING THE BEAST

- Scaffold



# TAMING THE BEAST

- Scaffold
  - YOU take care of the parts that aren't the central learning objective
  - Support metacognition & self-regulated learning
  - Process as well as outcome
  - Clear, step-by-step instructions



# TAMING THE BEAST

- Repeated feedback & revision opportunities





# TWO EXAMPLES

- First Example: PSY205

- Dr. Shannon Houck
- PDF: Houck\_ThreeAssignments\_PSY205LargeLecture
- Three 20-pt. assignments
  - Assignment #1: Read & evaluate a research article
  - Assignment #2: Propose a study that expands on that article
  - Assignment #3: Synthesize findings to solve a real-world problem



- Second Example: PSY336

- PDF: Martin\_Group Research Project\_LargeLecture
- Group Research Project

# Focus on Component Skills (PSY205)

- PDF: Houck\_ThreeAssignments\_PSY205LargeLecture.pdf
- **Assignment #1: Read & evaluate research article**
  - Students choose from a set of 10 pre-selected articles
  - Students write brief, full-sentence responses
  - Describes where to find relevant information
  - Direct connection to class material
  - Some low-level critical analysis



- Sample questions:
  - 1. Describe what this research is about. What was the purpose of the study?** (You should find a description of the study's aim/purpose in the introduction section of your article.)
  - 2. State the primary hypothesis. What did the researchers expect to find?** (You should find a description of the study's hypotheses in the introduction section of your article. Often, but not always, there is a separate section in the article labeled "expectations" or "hypotheses".)
  - 3. Did the researchers use an experiment or a correlational design to test the primary hypothesis?** (You should find a description of the research design in the procedure and/or methods sections of the article. As discussed in lecture and in the text, true experiments involve random assignment to conditions or groups; correlational studies investigate associations between variables.)

# Focus on Component Skills (PSY205)

- PDF: Houck\_ThreeAssignments\_PSY205LargeLecture.pdf
- **Assignment #2: Propose a study that expands on that article**

- **Students build on their first assignment**
- **Recognize the gaps in this study**
- **Apply information learned in class to creatively generating a new study**
- **Scaffolds each component of a study mirroring the article format**



- Sample:
  - Think about what the research you previously read about did not address that you want to know more about. How could you design a study to test something further about that topic?
  - Describe the key variables in your study and how you would operationalize each variable.
    - Variables: What, if anything, are you manipulating? What are you measuring?
    - Operational definitions: How specifically will you measure each variable in your study?

# Focus on Component Skills (PSY205)

- PDF: Houck\_ThreeAssignments\_PSY205LargeLecture.pdf
- **Assignment #3: Synthesize findings to solve a real-world problem**

- **Towards the end of the semester**
- **Focuses on skill of synthesis**
  - 3 concepts from 3 different content areas
- **Students must choose from a pre-selected set of “real world problems”**
- **Creative application to solving chosen issue**
- **Walks students through the format of their argument**

- **Sample questions:**

1. Describe the specific goals that you have set for this change program (this is like an operational definition!). In other words, what specific behavior(s) should change as a result of your efforts (e.g., increased number of hours volunteered per week, reduced automobile driving, etc.)
2. How would you know if your program has been successful? That is, how will you actually measure the amount of change in the behavior(s) you described in question 2?



# Group Research Project (PSY336)

- PDF: Martin\_Group Research Project\_LargeLecture



# Group Research Project (PSY336)

- PDF: Martin\_Group Research Project\_LargeLecture
  1. Form groups (5 students each)
  2. Group picks a topic & formats it into a research question
  3. EACH member: Article Analysis #1
    - Chance for revision
  4. EACH member: Article Analysis #2
    - Chance for revision
  5. Group: Annotated bibliography
  6. Group: Video presentation & posted on BB
  7. Individuals: 2 peer reviews of other groups' videos
    - One question posted to discussion board
    - Answered by group members
  8. Each group member: Self/Group Evaluation



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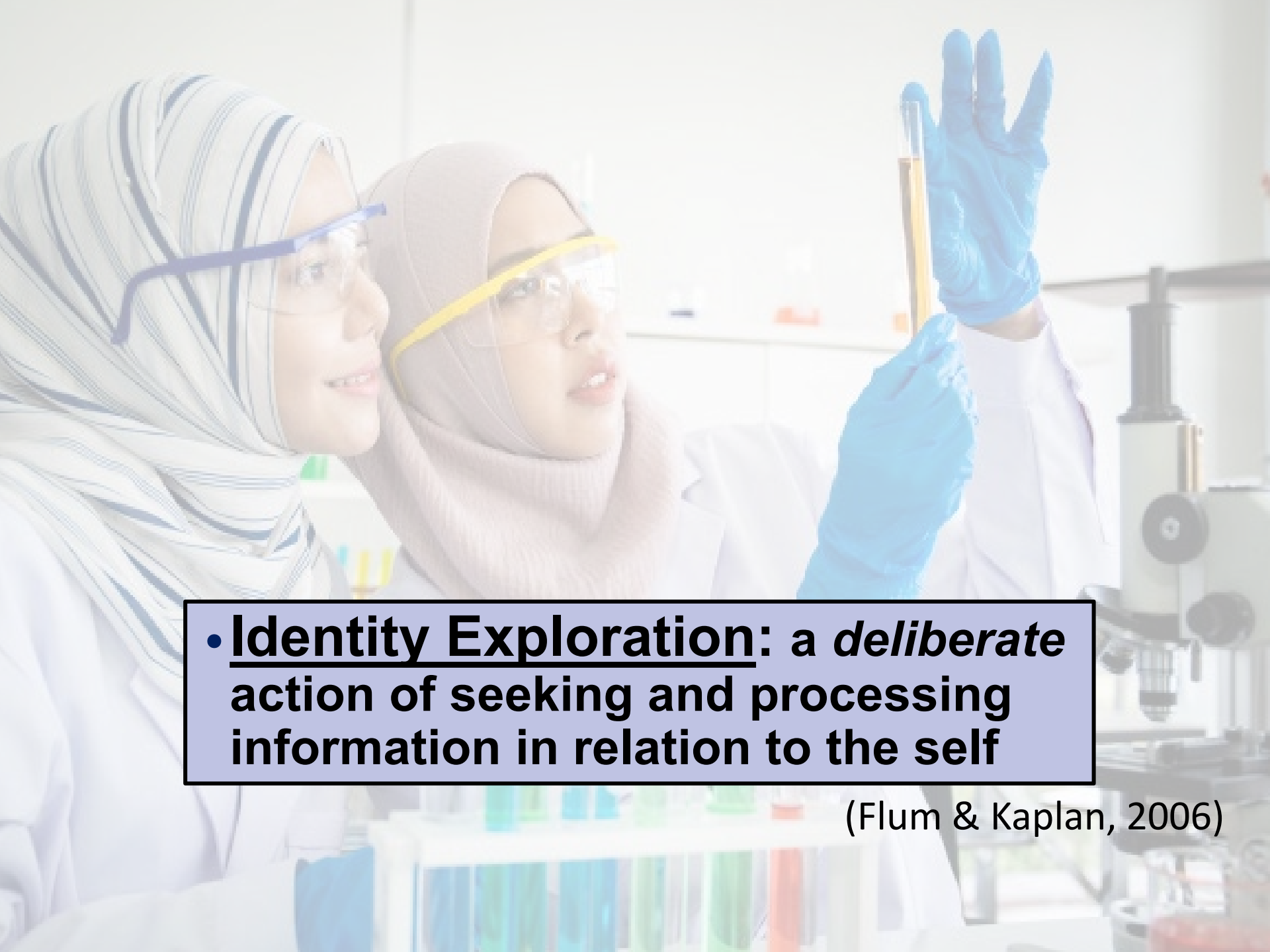
- One question posted to discussion board
- Answered by group members



8. Each group member: Self/Group Evaluation

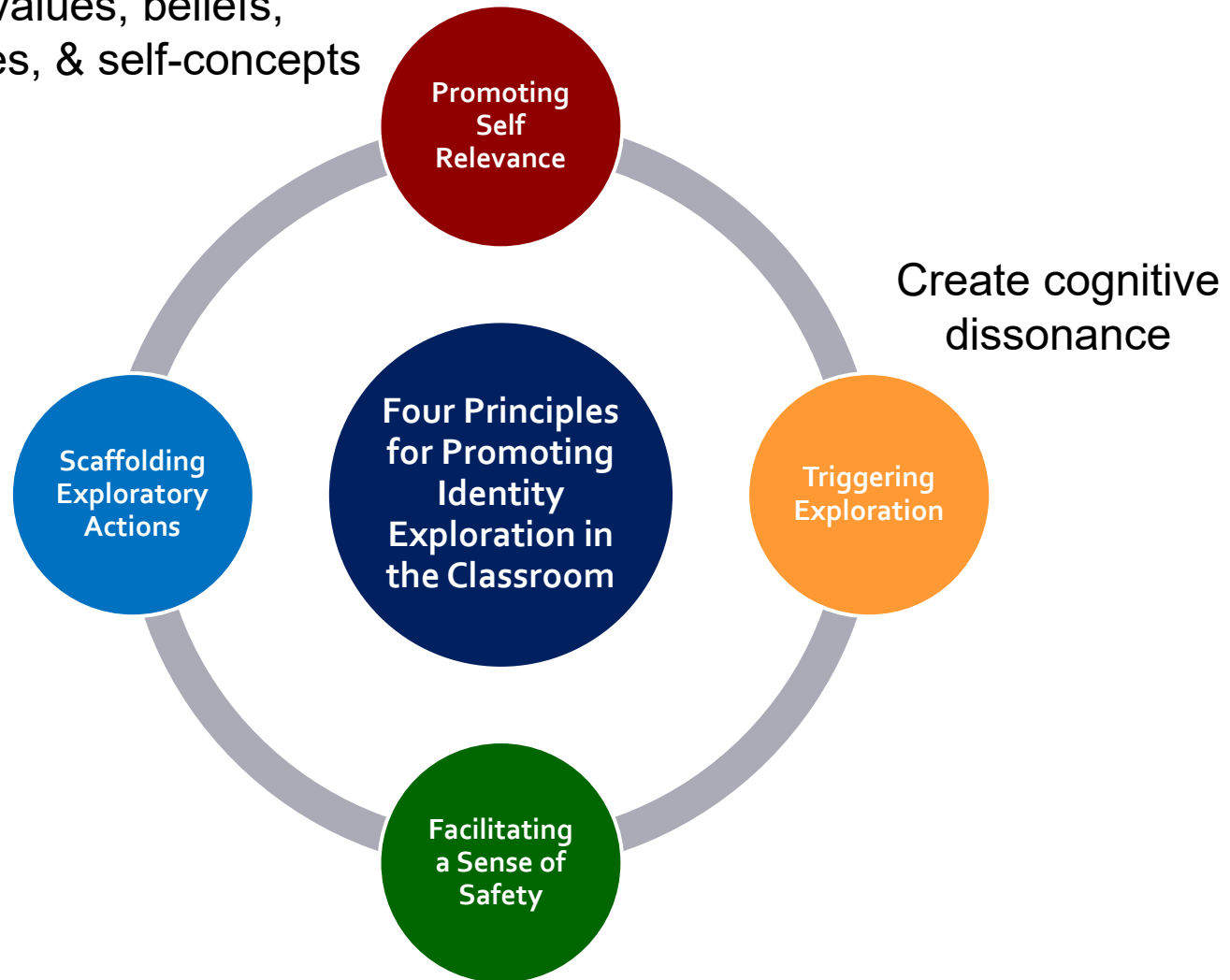
# Bringing identity development into the classroom



- 
- A photograph of two female scientists in a laboratory. They are both wearing hijabs and safety goggles. The scientist on the right is wearing blue gloves and holding a test tube with a yellow liquid. The scientist on the left is looking at the test tube. In the background, there is a microscope and a rack of test tubes.
- **Identity Exploration**: a *deliberate* action of seeking and processing information in relation to the self

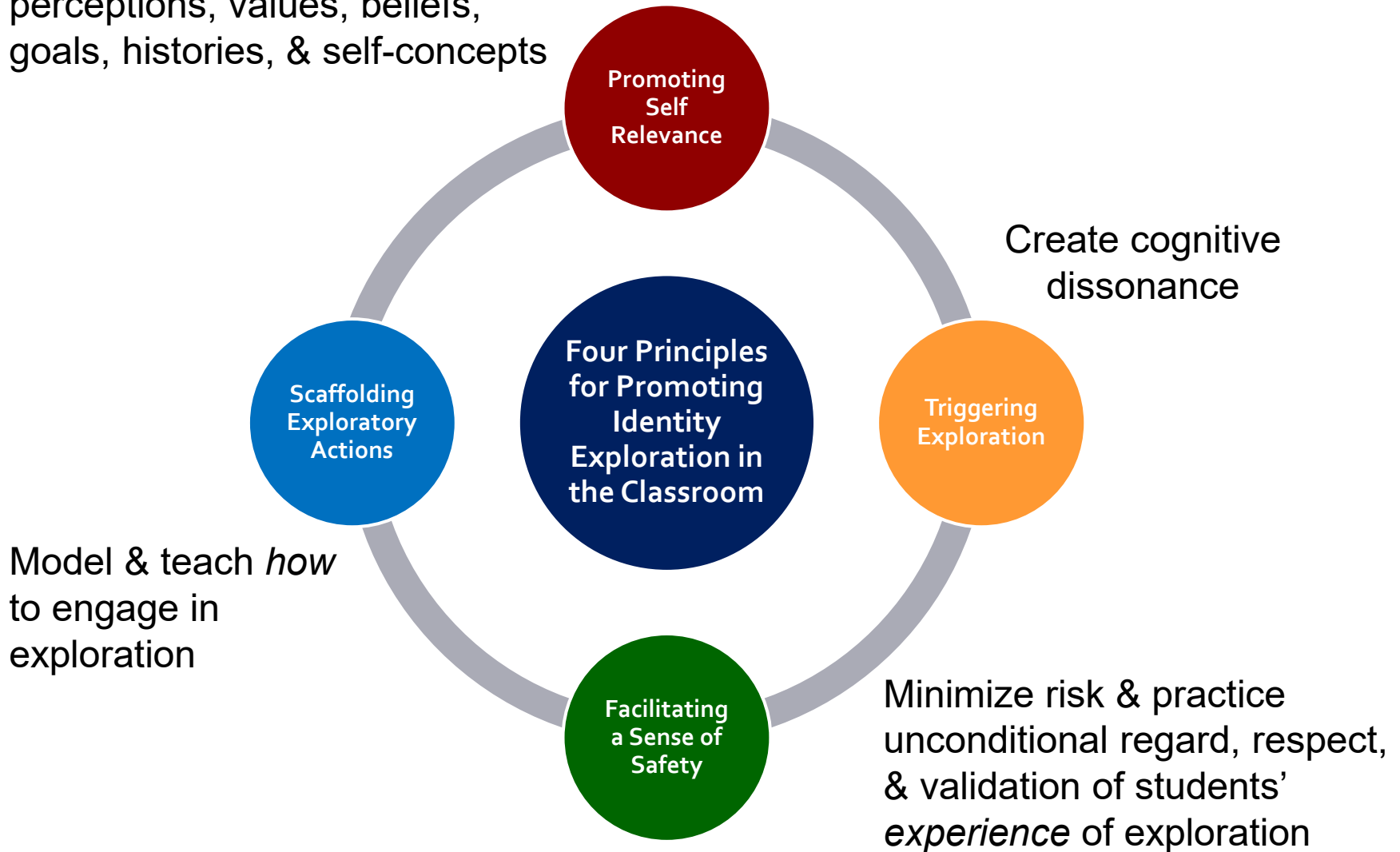
(Flum & Kaplan, 2006)

Ask students to examine their perceptions, values, beliefs, goals, histories, & self-concepts



(Kaplan & Flum, 2003; Kaplan, Sinai, & Flum, 2014; Sinai, Kaplan, & Flum, 2012)

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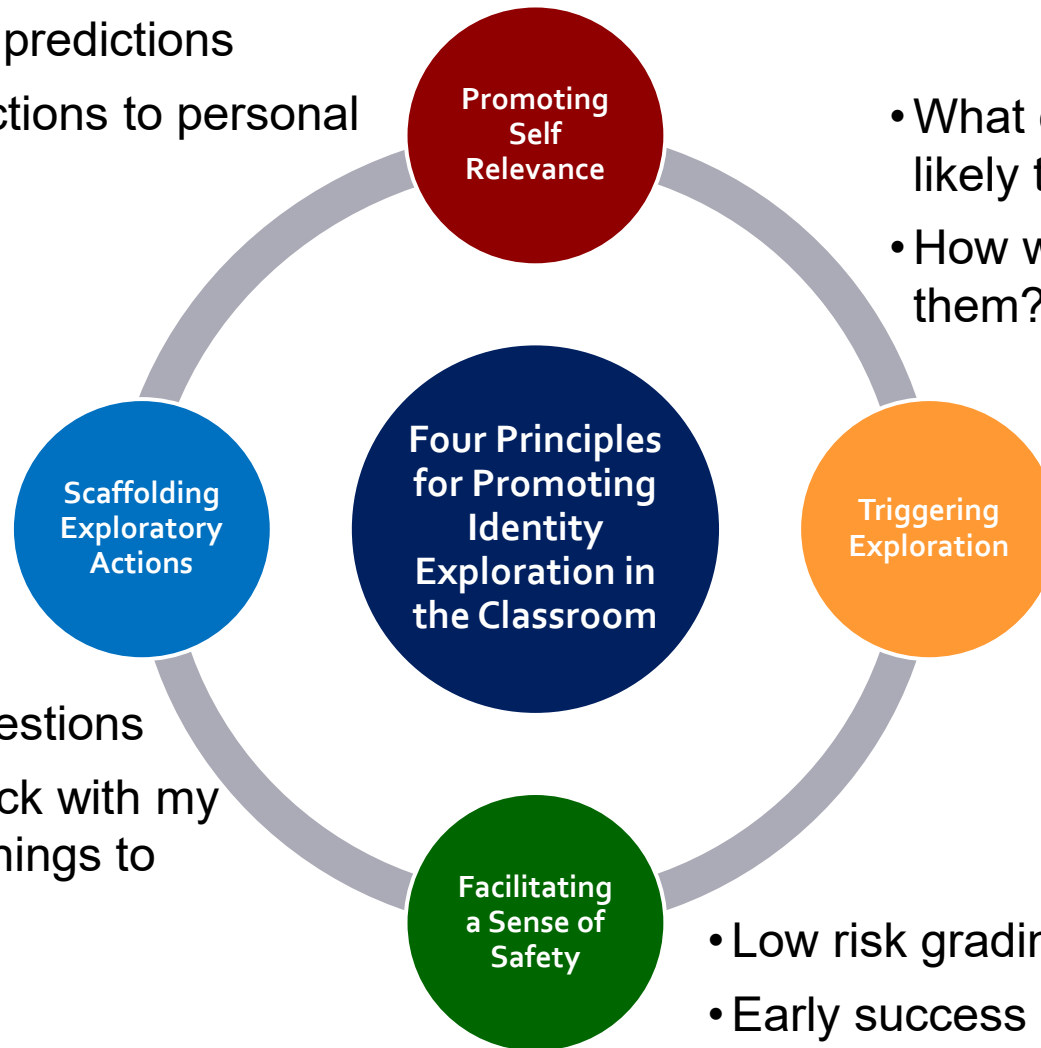
(Kaplan & Flum, 2003; Kaplan, Sinai, & Flum, 2014; Sinai, Kaplan, & Flum, 2012)

# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- Initial Reflection:
  - Read the syllabus, skim through the textbook, and think about **what you hope to get from the course this semester.**
  - Purpose:
    - Set personal goals *for your learning*
    - Draw connections between the material and your expectations, career aspirations, and personal goals
  - Short (1-2 pages)
  - Focused on the students' process (*how* will you meet these goals/overcome these challenges?)
  - Loose format/formal writing guidelines (first-person narrative)



- Set personal goals
- Examine expectations for course/make predictions
- Direct connections to personal relevance



(Kaplan & Flum, 2003; Kaplan, Sinai, & Flum, 2014; Sinai, Kaplan, & Flum, 2012)

# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- **Feedback Bank:**
  - Do you remember my two most important rules?



# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- **Feedback Bank**: Examples
  - **A student shares a learning goal:**
  - I think this is a great goal and I hope that the class structure, reading, discussions, and activities will help to support you in this process as well!

# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- **Feedback Bank**: Examples
  - **A student shares an anticipated challenge:**
  - I am glad to hear you're already making efforts to work on this! I've posted study guides to help narrow your reading. You can find them on Blackboard under “Study Guides.”

# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- **Feedback Bank**: Examples
  - **A student says they're a non-major:**
  - It sounds like you'll bring a unique perspective to the material. I look forward to hearing what you have to offer our class discussions.



# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- **Feedback Bank**: Examples
  - **A student disclosed a mental illness:**
  - Thank you for this incredibly thoughtful piece of writing. You made some insightful points and I feel the need to share some of my thoughts with you as well.
    - Be thoughtful about what you choose to disclose to the class as a whole
    - Adopt an “academic” (what does research say about this) mentality
    - Review the topics we will cover ahead of time so that you are not taken by surprise
    - Discomfort is ok, but practice self-care
    - Come to me when needed

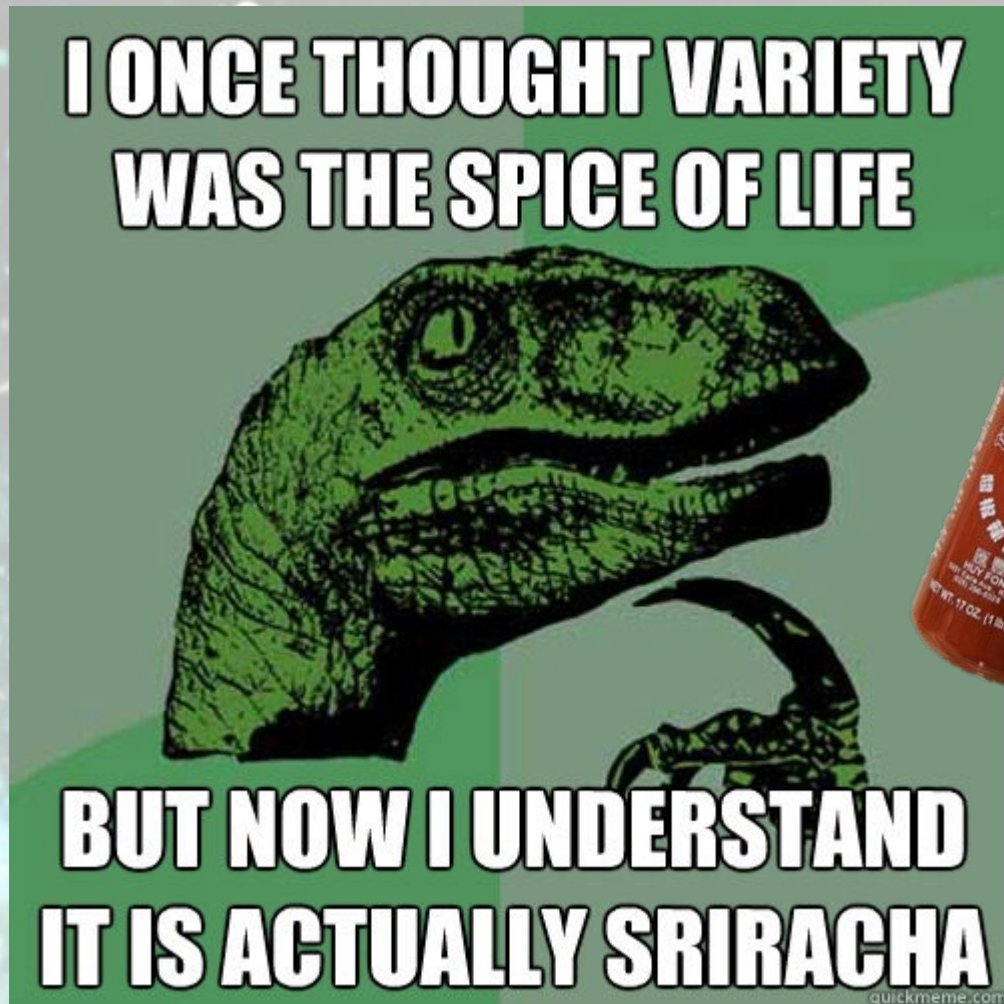
# Reflective Writing

- Example #1: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Reflection Pieces & Feedback Bank
- **Final Reflection:**
  - Reflect on the semester and think about how developmental psychopathology may apply to your own life.
  - Make connections between your thinking about this topic and popular notions.
  - How will what you learn in this course influence you going forward?
  - NOT an evaluation of the course

# Reflective Writing

- Examples: PSY400/PSY336
  - PDF: Martin\_Poverty & Academics personal reflection
- Read a research article (illustrating the role of environmental reliability in shaping children's self-regulation)
- Connect this research study to broader implications for how “we” (U.S. dominant culture) think about poverty & academic success. Are our ideas flawed?
- Connect this thought process to your own development. How did your family's socioeconomic status influence your academic success?

# Variety is the spice of life



# The Persuasive Essay

- PDF: Martin\_Opinion paper (Persuasive essay)
- **What is it?**
  - A five-paragraph essay convincing readers of your side of a debated topic using evidence
    - Paragraph 1: Introduction
    - Paragraphs 2-4: Three main points supporting your position
    - Paragraph 5: Conclusion
- I let students pick from a list of topics:
  - Does watching *13 Reasons Why* increase adolescents' risk for suicide?
  - Should juvenile offenders (under 18) who commit murder be tried as adults?



# The Persuasive Essay

- **Good for:**

- Practicing finding, reading, and synthesizing research
- Supporting arguments with facts
- Working on organization

- **Not great for:**

- Challenging pre-existing ideas
- Requires ability to find research and deal with contradictory findings

# The Public Service Announcement

- PDF: Martin\_Developing a Public Service Announcement
- **What is it?**
  - A PSA is meant to raise awareness of or change public attitudes about a topic (think getting teens to stop vaping)
- **Part 1: Research the topic (e.g., suicidality among college students)**
  - Choose one article
  - Find one article
- **Part 2: Develop a PSA for SU students**
  - Step 1: Identify resources
  - Step 2: Design a PSA

# The Public Service Announcement

- **Good for:**

- Practicing finding & reading research
- Applying research to real-life problems
- Helping students think about audience
- Connecting students to resources
- Engaging students in creativity

- **Not great for:**

- Students who tend to generalize
- Group work(?)

# The Blog

- PDF: Martin\_Mindfulness Blog
- **What is it?**
  - An online journal (“web-log”) or informational page designed to communicate scientific findings to a lay audience
- **Step 1:** Read an article & summarize
- **Step 3:** Explain the study to a specific audience

# The Blog

- **Good for:**

- Practicing reading & summarizing research
- Helping students practice communicating science knowledge *in their own words*
- Thinking about how to communicate to specific audiences
- Some simple applications to real life

- **Not great for:**

- Helping students engage in formal writing
- Some students may find the “pretending” to be challenging



# The Case Study

- **What is it?**

- An in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event

- **Example 1:** Generating a case study

- PDF: Martin\_Create a Case Study

- **Example 2:** Evaluating a case study

- PDF: Martin\_Defending Marissa

- **Example 3:** Practice identifying abnormal behavior

- PDF: Martin\_WinnieThePoohAssignment



# The Case Study

- **Good for:**
  - Illustrating and applying concepts (making them “come alive”)
  - Helping students practice empathy and perspective-taking
  - Practicing moving between **idiographic** and **nomothetic** approaches
- **Not great for:**
  - Helping students engage in formal writing
  - Some students get narrowly focused on small details

**That's all folks!**



**Thoughts?**