

Dr. Eileen O'Brien

The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence is proud to highlight Dr. O'Brien, whose teaching emphasizes skill-building, confidence, and the power of constructive feedback. Across both qualitative and quantitative methods courses, her approach centers on modeling, empowerment, and helping students recognize their own capacity to succeed. When teaching qualitative methods, Dr. O'Brien uses an in-class mock interview exercise that allows students to practice real research skills in a supportive environment. A pair of student volunteers use their own interview guide to interview a classmate who serves as an "actor" for the assignment. After a few minutes, the interview is paused and the class is invited to offer feedback. As she notes, the initial responses are usually general and focused only on what went well. Meanwhile, she has taken detailed notes on the interaction.

At that point, Dr. O'Brien models what constructive, specific critique looks like. She highlights precise moments when interview techniques were effective and identifies the kinds of data those techniques helped elicit. She also points out missed opportunities to probe more deeply or follow up on important details shared by the interviewee. When the next group of students steps forward, the shift is immediate. The quality of peer feedback improves dramatically as students become more comfortable offering detailed, meaningful critique. By normalizing this process and modeling it herself, she finds that students are quick to "pick up that ball and run with it." It is, as she puts it, her favorite day of class. In her quantitative methods courses, Dr. O'Brien noticed that many sociology majors initially felt intimidated by statistics and computers. Students were required to complete lab exercises using SPSS and General Social Survey data, and her instinct at first was to demonstrate everything herself. Over time, however, her commitment to student empowerment led her to rethink that approach. Once she identified students who were catching on more quickly, she began inviting them to the podium to demonstrate how to complete assignments. This shift made a powerful difference. Seeing a peer succeed helped other students recognize that someone "like them" could do it too, and that they were capable of mastering the material themselves.

For Dr. O'Brien, the most meaningful moments often come after the course has ended. The messages she receives from students-sometimes years later-confirm that her classes have had a lasting impact on their lives.

Her teaching philosophy is captured in a quote she shares with her students: "When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else."-Toni Morrison (1931-2019) American novelist.