

My teaching philosophy is rooted in a commitment to cultivating students' sense of agency. I believe students become genuinely invested in learning when they have meaningful opportunities to make decisions, construct knowledge through experience, and collaborate with others. This conviction has been shaped by my experiences as a first-grade teacher, my graduate training in developmental psychology, and my research on children's developing agency and normative motivation. These experiences have repeatedly shown me that all learners are most engaged when they play an active role in their own learning, and this informs my teaching.

Throughout my graduate training at Duke University, I have taught in a variety of settings, including serving as Instructor of Record for an upper-level seminar in *Moral Development* (Summer 2025; course rating: 5/5, instructor rating: 5/5; see [syllabus](#)), as a graduate teaching lead in [an undergraduate-focused, interdisciplinary and community-based research team](#), and as a teaching assistant in large introductory lectures with more than 100 students to small, discussion-based seminars. I have also mentored undergraduate researchers at Duke and from primarily undergraduate institutions. Across these contexts, I have consistently sought to cultivate students' sense of agency.

Fostering Agency in the Classroom

My pedagogy demonstrates that students learn best when they are treated as active agents in their own learning. I cultivate this sense of agency by trusting students with meaningful intellectual responsibility through three complementary practices: providing meaningful choice, encouraging collaborative inquiry, and creating authentic learning experiences.

Facilitating Meaningful Choice. Research has consistently shown that student autonomy and meaningful choice promote deeper learning and mastery (Evans & Boucher, 2015; Cullen & Oppenheimer, 2024), and I incorporate both into my teaching and mentorship practices. For example, instead of a traditional final paper or exam, students in my Moral Development class developed their own research question and study design, and implemented their projects independently. I also gave students multiple outlets to show their mastery of the material. For example, students were required to reflect on the weekly readings, relate them to their own personal experiences, and could communicate these reflections through writing or video/audio recording. Beyond the classroom, my mentorship style, which similarly emphasizes student choice and ownership, has been reflected in the feedback I have received from multiple research mentees. My students consistently voice their appreciation for being trusted to contribute ideas, conduct independent analyses, and branch out their research interests within the lab. One student described her experience with me as follows: *"Jessa encouraged us to venture into new areas of research within our lab, emphasizing that being a research assistant was about finding our interests as much as supporting our mentors' projects"*.

Encouraging Collaboration. Agency develops not only through independent work, but also through intellectual collaboration. Students in my Moral Development course often participated in structured role-playing debates, which one student described as *"a great way to come to their own conclusions"* about theories on morality and moral dilemmas. Moreover, peer feedback was an essential and graded aspect of the class, where students provided structured and thoughtful feedback for their classmates at each stage of their final research project, from idea generation to data analysis and results. Prior to this, I had the unique opportunity to serve

as a graduate teaching lead in an interdisciplinary undergraduate course that partnered with a local children's museum. As a member of the team, I mentored over 10 undergraduates, guiding them through the process of designing and ultimately leading their own research project with child participants in the museum setting.

Learning by Doing. I believe students learn psychology by practicing psychology. This philosophy informs every teaching experience I lead. For students in my Moral Development class, this consisted of creating their own testable research question, designing a child-friendly research study (complete with a script and stimuli, see examples of final projects [here](#) and [here](#)), collecting their own data from families who joined via Zoom, and analyzing their final data, which students found to be a “*highly enjoyable process*”. Moreover, my students continued to engage in research outside of the classroom. One student is currently writing their project to be submitted for peer-reviewed publication and others independently pursued opportunities to attend local conferences to present their research. Students in my community-based research team even went back to our community partner to present their findings to the staff. Even when serving in supporting instructional roles, I found ways to incorporate experiential learning in my guest lectures. For example, when teaching about creativity and flow states, I led students through an in-class simulation of a published study examining the relationship between creative flow and physiological arousal (see Belliache et al., 2025). Students were given paint and canvases and wore a device on their wrist to track their heart rate (e.g., Apple Watch). Using the same timing as the original study, students attempted to enter the creative “flow” state and compared their heart rates before and after.

Teaching Experience & Expertise

At Duke University, my teaching responsibilities have continued to grow alongside my formal training in evidence-based pedagogy. During the upcoming academic year, I have won a Bass Connections Teaching Fellowship where I will serve as a course coordinator for *Introduction to Psychology* (an introductory level class with 200+ students), in which I will directly manage 16 undergraduate students who will serve as teaching fellows for the course. In the Spring, I will return as the Instructor of Record for *Moral Development*, this time for a full semester, in-person class of up to 25 students. In addition to this, I have pursued a [Certificate of College Teaching](#) and have been selected as a [Preparing Future Faculty](#) Fellow for the 2026-27 academic year. Through this fellowship, I will be paired with a faculty mentor for a neighboring liberal arts college to shadow their schedule, give guest lectures, and learn more deeply what it means to both conduct quality research and teach quality courses in a liberal arts setting.

These upcoming roles build on a range of teaching experiences throughout my graduate training. Prior to becoming Instructor of Record for *Moral Development*, I served as a Teaching Assistant for *Developmental Psychology*, *Social Psychology*, and *The Psychology of Imagination*, in settings ranging from introductory lectures with more than 100 students to a small, discussion-based seminar of 15 undergraduate and graduate students. I also served as a graduate student lead for the Bass Connections course *Increasing Children's Sense of Belonging in STEM Fields*, where I guided ten undergraduates through an interdisciplinary research project in collaboration with a local children's science museum. This project resulted in multiple conference presentations and a peer-reviewed manuscript (**Stegall***, Muñoz*, et al., in prep).

My expertise in developmental, cognitive, and moral psychology makes me well positioned to teach a range of foundational psychology courses such as *Introduction to Psychology*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Social Psychology*, *Cognitive Development*, and *Moral Psychology*. Additionally, my research in graduate school has demanded in-depth knowledge of research methods and statistics. Therefore, I am also interested in teaching courses on *Research Design & Methods* and *Introduction to Behavioral Research*. In these courses, students could expect me to incorporate introductory R programming to give them hands-on experience with data management, analysis, and visualization. I am also qualified to teach advanced courses related to my research, such as *Moral Development*, *The Psychology of Imagination*, *Children's Social Cognition*, *The Psychology of Norms*, *The Developing Self*, and *Agency Across the Lifespan*.

Dedication to Mentorship

My mentoring philosophy extends naturally from my classroom philosophy. Throughout my graduate career, fostering students' agency has been a central part of both my research and outreach activities. In the lab, I have directly mentored more than 20 undergraduate students, including five who completed independent study projects and two who pursued independent honors theses. We are currently preparing both honors projects for publication, one of which incorporated physiological methods that were entirely new to our lab. I have guided these students through every stage of the research process while gradually entrusting them with increasing intellectual responsibility. Student feedback consistently highlights their appreciation of the autonomy and confidence I give them: “[Jessa’s] attention to detail, and holistic approach to ensuring her students understood projects in their entirety, grew my confidence, and as a senior in undergraduate I was capable of training my own team of research assistants on my study”. My mentorship efforts have led to over 12 undergraduate-led presentations at local, regional, and internationally recognized conferences.

Beyond the lab, I have sought mentorship opportunities outside of Duke to help create a more diverse and inclusive environment within the field of psychology. As a leading member of Duke’s Anti-Racism Community for four years, I helped create and actively participate as a mentor every year in Duke’s Virtual Office Hours, which is a free program for anyone interested in attending graduate school in psychology to get feedback on their materials. Since its inception, the program has served more than 423 prospective graduate students, many of whom thank us personally after getting accepted into graduate school. We have also recently launched our very first Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP), in which undergraduate students from local non-R1 universities are paired with a Duke mentor for two semesters to work on an independent research project and present their findings at a student-run poster session at the end of the year. These experiences highlight my dedication to mentoring students at all levels and in a variety of contexts. Some of my most rewarding research experiences have emerged from close collaborations with undergraduate students, and I look forward to continuing this model of mentorship, teaching, and scholarship throughout my career.