Jivko Sinapov

Teaching Statement

I was a senior in college when I discovered how much I enjoy teaching. At the time, I was a teaching assistant for a weekly workshop and my duties were to introduce the students to a problem and to guide them toward designing and implementing a solution as a team. At the same time, I was enrolled in a seminar that covered individual learning styles and different teaching techniques designed to address them. This early experience ignited a passion for teaching that is still with me.

In graduate school, I continued to be involved in education as a teaching assistant for the following courses: Developmental Robotics, Computational Perception, Discrete Computational Structures, Computational Implementation and Prototyping in HCI, and Cognitive Psychology of HCI. In addition, this past Summer I taught an HCI course on User Interface Design and this coming Spring, I will be teaching the Computational Perception course.

This wide range of experiences shaped my philosophy for designing and teaching a course, namely that the work the students produce should have meaning that goes beyond simply getting a good grade. I believe that homework assignments should be designed to teach students to solve real-world problems with innovative approaches. I also believe that the students should have the freedom to explore their own topic for class projects so that they will feel personally invested and motivated. In the class that I taught, I also used a peer-review system and I believe it drove the students to produce quality work that they would be proud to show to their classmates. Many of them treated their course projects as something that they will use long after the end of the semester.

I also believe that research should inform teaching, which is why I helped my students develop project ideas that investigated important research problems in robotics and human-computer interaction. To further encourage this, in two of the graduate classes for which I was a TA, we made our lab’s robot available to students so that they could conduct experiments for their final projects. I was happy to see that many of the students continued to expand on their project ideas, even after the class was over.

One helpful lesson that I learned from my advisor is that awards, even symbolic ones, can go a long way toward motivating students. When I received the Teaching Excellence award last year, I too became motivated to keep up the good work and to strive to do even better. Teaching a class for the first time further solidified my passion for teaching and at the end of the term I felt great joy as I saw how much my students had accomplished. I look forward to experiencing the same next semester and in future years.