Nancy Felipe Russo is an accomplished researcher. She also knows the value of classroom teaching, and that teaching undergraduates requires much more than a daily magic act.
Of Magic Shows and Lecture Halls
by Sarah Auffret

The late-comers and forgetfuls pass their entry ‘tickets’ to the front, each sheet a brief summary of last night’s reading. Soon, a sheep’s brain will be on display, the screen will flicker with images, and the “magic” will begin. The interaction takes place between Russo—researcher, author, and one of the top faculty members at Arizona State University—and a group of 80- and 90-year-old freshmen.

Many of the students seated for Introductory Psychology are oblivious to the fact that Russo wrote their textbook, that she’s done pioneering work on women and mental health, and that even her undergraduate research was among the most cited literature in the country years ago.

They only know that Russo requires a daily ticket in as well as a ticket out of the class, the latter the answer to a question about the day’s class topic. They know she is a dopamine teacher who makes them think, who keeps the class interactive and interesting, and who knows the names of every single student.

“You’re Lydia, right? From Nogales?” she says, pointing to a girl with long black hair and green eyes seated near the front who thinks she has the answer to a question. The girl nods. A husky young man with a baseball cap raises a hand to try out his theory. “Don’t tell me, you’re Jason. No, I mean Justin, correct?” It’s early in the semester, so she doesn’t always get the name right on the first try.

Another hand shoots up from the back row. This time Russo nails it, right out of the box. “Randy, tell us what you think.”

A class of 115 freshmen. Russo also knows the names of the 120 students in her 5:40 p.m. Intro to Psychology class, the ones who are working day jobs and who slide into class with only seconds to spare. Many are older, returning to college after motherhood or several years in a career.

“I always teach a night class, because I want people who work to have access to a full range of classes,” Russo says. “A lot of my students work, so I try to design the assignments so they can make up class work if they have to miss a class.”

Learning the names of 235 students takes a lot of effort. Russo asks each student for a photo and a few paragraphs about themselves, then creates a binder she relates to each class. It makes the class more fun to teach, she says, and it helps her tailor her examples to their interests.

She’s created an interactive Web site for students to post their own examples, questions, and observations for each other. She also corresponds with them individually by e-mail, a task that takes a sizeable chunk out of her day.

“Congratulations on the wonderful examples,” she tells the class, writing the Web site address on the board. “Here’s a wonderful example of cultural norms in action. A student saw a couple from India meet at the airport, and the woman hugged the man’s knees. I’m looking for examples like this from real life, to see if you’re applying the principles of the course.”

Russo’s energy level spills out into the class as she walks from her podium to the graduated rows of orange chairs, rolling her hands in circles to emphasize a point. This afternoon she will meet with a couple of doctoral students and an honors student to discuss their research topics. Her own writing will get squeezed into a few precious early morning hours tomorrow.

Her “magic act” of teaching undergraduates each semester is part of a debt owed to a community college teacher. That teacher introduced her to psychology more than 35 years ago. Her mentoring is a thank-you to the professor at the University of California at Davis who helped with her groundbreaking undergraduate research into “personal space.”

Russo views the directions of her career as an accidental path, marked by mistakes she learned from and guardian angels who guided her feet when she had no idea where she was going.

She grew up in the small farming and logging town of Oroville, Calif., the granddaughter of Spanish immigrants and the eldest child of the high school football coach. Though nurtured by close family ties and obviously very bright, she had no female career models and no encouragement to pursue her love of science.

In high school, she opted for home economics and typing over calculus and physics.

Russo describes her excitement at discovering how psychology could pose real world questions and solve real world problems. But inexperience prevented her from seeking out all-important mentors as she moved through graduate school. And naiveté kept her from protesting the fact that academic and career opportunities were closed to her as a woman.

Sex discrimination was common practice in the 1960s. Despite top scores on the Graduate Record Exam, Phi Beta Kappa membership, and a budding research track record, Russo was turned down by all the graduate schools to which she applied. All but one.
A woman's response to rape depends on the social consequences of the act within her family and her culture. Most research on rape has been conducted from the more individualistic Anglo perspective, focusing on the physical and psychological impact of the experience on individual women.

Russo's recent research is being conducted with Luciana Ramos, an ASU postdoctoral student from Mexico. Together, Russo and Ramos explore the impact of rape on the family and social lives of women, particularly Mexican rape victims. The Mexican culture values the family. Because part of the woman's role in the family is to be concerned with the feelings of others, a more intense “silencing” occurs that can interfere with the woman's ability to express her feelings and get help.

A Mexican husband's role includes the expectation that he will be a family protector. The woman may avoid talking about her feelings, lest she make him feel he has failed in this role. She may not talk to her mother, because a daughter's role is to make her mother happy, not sad.

"I find that research and teaching are closely related, because you're not teaching what you learned in graduate school, you're on the cutting edge," Russo says. "Being a researcher makes me a better teacher. I'm not talking about something that's way over there, but something that's a living thing that I'm doing right here, right now."

Few of Russo's freshmen students realize the professional stature of this animated magician who engages them in topics of race, culture, gender, and IQ. Though she works to develop their critical thinking skills and their ways of evaluating human behavior, they don't question her expertise.

They do know they are helping her develop an introductory course that teaches human behavior in the context of culture. She asks them to talk to her classes so undergraduates can hear about research that's alive. If they can see researchers, and can get good hands-on research experience themselves, they'll think "I can do it too."

Psychology is important in students' lives, Russo says. It helps them appreciate other people's complexity, their motivations and influences. As students think about their own values and behavior, they become more aware of why they do things, and less susceptible to their reflexes.

"Students can understand how situations affect people, what motivates people, and how people see the world differently. I think they'll find they can go a long way and have a much better life," Russo explains.

Her assistant dims the lights and starts a video. Students get out their notebooks and begin writing today's ticket to exit the show. Professor Nancy Felipe Russo has pulled the rabbit out of the hat once more.

Russo's research focuses on the connections between unintended pregnancy and its effects on a woman's mental health, relationships, and self esteem. For more information, contact Nancy Felipe Russo, Ph.D., Regents Professor of Psychology, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, 480-965-3326. Or send e-mail to nancy.russo@asu.edu

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