

My Teaching Philosophy

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Over the course of a career, every teacher develops a philosophy which governs his or her approach to the facilitation of learning. Below is my attempt to articulate my personal philosophy, based on pedagogical theory, my experience as an educator and – to no small extent – my own memory of being a student.

First, I strive to ensure that all of my interaction with students is conducted on a solid basis of mutual respect. All human beings – young adults in particular – desire to be respected by their community of fellows at all levels and at all times. In the classroom context, this means the instructor must never forget the importance of listening and must never adopt a condescending tone when communicating with students (a practice students sense instantly and, understandably, resent). By the same token, the establishment of mutual respect in the classroom allows teacher to set high standards more readily. In an environment characterized by mutual respect, students no longer perceive their teacher's high expectations as some inscrutable form of undeserved punishment or as an arbitrary and ultimately pointless hoop through which they are expected to jump, but rather as further evidence of the instructor's high estimation of their skills and genuine interest in their development as fellow scholars.

In my effort to minimize obstacles to learning, I seek to promote a positive, mutually supportive atmosphere in the classroom. I think teachers all too easily neglect the intense pressure that is exerted upon students to achieve results that can be represented numerically, recorded, categorized and applied against those of others. Parental expectations, grade inflation, and an ever more competitive job market are just a few of the phenomena that can contribute to this pressure. It should then come as no surprise when, to cite a common example, students unnecessarily take themselves to task for their mistakes, which most often impedes rather than facilitates their learning. For this reason, I often remind students that “learning means going out on a limb” and that mistakes are an inevitable and necessary part of this process. “If you knew everything, you wouldn't be here, would you?” is an occasional reminder I give to students in order to set their minds at ease and help them recall the greater purpose of their academic endeavors. Eventually, students come to recognize and appreciate the significant and ignore the incidentals that had once hindered their learning. In this way, the ultimate purpose of mental and spiritual growth is served.

To the greatest possible extent, I attempt to make use of the vast amount of knowledge students bring with them to the classroom by combining what they already know with what I am introducing to them for the first time. Students are not – as has been pointed out in much of the recent pedagogical literature – “empty vessels.” What is not so often mentioned is that the students are themselves typically unaware of the value of their pre-existent knowledge. For this reason, I am a devoted practitioner of Socratic method. The elicitation of answers which lead students to arrive at their own conclusions has the immediate benefit of enhancing integration and retention of new subject matter.

Affectively, students develop genuine self-confidence based on an appreciation of their innate critical thinking skills. Through their consistent application in the classroom, the skills themselves are honed and improved, naturally curiosity is tapped and learning takes place at an ever-increasing rate.

I also seek to consistently make students aware of different factors that contribute to a given phenomenon. In the foreign language classroom, for example, I will often not just introduce a new vocabulary word but discuss its etymology, related forms and the way in which its meaning may have changed over time. I will also illustrate the usage of a new term with examples so that the term never seems too abstract or obscure. As a global learner and thinker, I am convinced of the oneness of all knowledge. I believe the transmission of ideas can all too often be received as a compendium of distinct, unrelated and useless facts. If students perceive what they learn to be irrelevant, the discipline itself runs the risk of extinction. This is particularly true of the humanities, a field which is, unfortunately, called upon with increasing frequency to justify its own existence. Through an approach to teaching that is interdisciplinary and holistic, I believe the study of the humanities can demonstrate that it is not only critically important, but arguably – particularly in the age of globalization – more necessary than ever before.

Finally, I am aware that learning methods vary. For this reason, I endeavor to make use of different media to reach different types of learners. Music, film, personal correspondence, websites and field trips are methods by which the theoretical may be readily brought to life for students. To use Bloom's taxonomy as a model, one might say that I emphasize synthesis as not a "fifth step" but rather as an integral part of every stage of the learning process. I also strongly believe that as an educator it is my responsibility to remain accessible to students, during and outside of my office hours. During my own experience as both an undergraduate and a graduate student, I had the good fortune of being able to regularly discuss with my professors on an individual basis what I had learned in the classroom. Indeed, these sessions were every bit as beneficial to me as the time I had spent in the classroom. As a professor, I try to emulate the example these educators set for me by remaining accessible to students outside of class.

In conclusion, I would simply like to add that although I have emphasized the importance of the active application of knowledge in this statement, I chose to pursue a career in education in large part because it gratifies me to see people experience the joy of learning for its own sake, prior to any application or goal, learning as a never-ending process of self-discovery and self-overcoming. It is during these brief moments that the serious work of teaching becomes nothing short of a great privilege.