Teaching Philosophy

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If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea. - Antoine de St. Exupery

Teaching is the art of awakening the spirit. Great deeds begin with learning, and learning begins with motivation. As a university professor in a school of education, my fundamental goal is to inspire and engage my students.

Every day, I try to bring passion, creativity, and a sense of humor to my classes. I want my students to "yearn for the sea." I want them to understand and embrace the big ideas I teach. Then they can do great things in the world beyond my classroom.

Since I teach teachers, "the sea" we study is teaching itself: the miraculous nature of the human mind, and the challenges of stimulating it and changing it. I want my students to appreciate the wonder and obstacles of our job. I want them to feel knowledgeable and confident when they have students of their own.

I try to teach for understanding, not just memorize-and-repeat, by focusing on big ideas. Big ideas include organizing principles, useful insights, and compelling strategies. I teach my students to respect complexity, to use multiple perspectives and multiple cases, and to distrust simple answers.

I'm a constructivist. This means that I give my students ownership of their learning, like letting them teach parts of the class. This keeps my curriculum authentic: we talk about teaching, and then they teach. Sometimes they stumble, but that's how I know they're striving at the edge of their abilities, in the "Wobbly Place" (the Zone of Proximal Development). I know they're learning as much as they can with a minimum of "training wheels" (scaffolding). When they teach even a 10 minute lesson, they learn more than they would from a lecture five times as long. I try to use meaningful assessments, including detailed rubrics with comments, so that they can aim for clear goals even as they wobble.

I don't want my students to fear the challenges of teaching. Challenge is one way we know we're alive: when we're striving in the Wobbly Place. I encourage striving and I protect my students' freedom to fail. Admitting ignorance, taking risks, and making mistakes are invaluable ingredients in learning. Teaching is a challenging job to learn.

I try to create a safe space in which my students can struggle well. I practice an authoritative teaching style—a mix of structure and caring. The structure includes high expectations, as I push my students to the edge. The caring includes trying to understand my students' lives, dreams, and anxieties. I understand that my students come from different backgrounds. Some are veterans and some are parents. Some are changing careers, out of necessity or to finally build their dreams. Many are trying to escape the stereotypes and other limitations of rural Wisconsin. They cherish some of the values they received from their families and communities, while questioning others (e.g., about gender roles or sexuality identity). I promote inclusivity and tolerance with strategies like people...
first language. I explicitly teach how to honor difference. I try to be understanding about my students personal problems, and I readily make accommodations for disabilities and life crises.

I seldom need to use traditional classroom management strategies, because my students are highly-motivated adults. Instead, I focus on teaching professionalism and collegiality. But I don't hesitate to act when any students are interfering with their peers' opportunity to learn.

The most important part of my job is modeling. I try to make my teaching transparent (e.g., by explaining why I do what I do). I demonstrate an openness to feedback from my students, coupled with a commitment to self improvement. I tell my students that there are many kinds of good teachers, and many paths to becoming a good teacher. I hope that some of my students base their teaching identities on my example. But I only want them to embrace the choices that make sense to them.

One way I model good teaching is how I use technology. I deeply integrate a variety of technologies, including Kat. Kat is a course management system (like D2L or Blackboard). I created Kat so I could teach and assess in extraordinary ways, including giving my students extensive ownership of the curriculum (e.g., the questions we discuss about the cases we study). I may be the most "high tech" teacher my students ever encounter, and I try to expand their comfort zone. Teachers need to integrate technology more, and that starts with their university training.

I continually strive to become a better teacher, so that my students are inspired and informed about becoming good teachers themselves. I want them want to master the "endless sea" of their students' potential--potential that can be activated through good teaching. I try to prepare good teachers, so that their students can make their own positive difference in their jobs, relationships, and citizenship.

Education is the best solution to most problems, including increasing tolerance, finding or creating good jobs, and becoming better citizens of our global community and our planet. Good teaching is immeasurably important. Teaching is how I am the change I want to see in the world.

Be the change you want to see in the world. -Gandhi

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