

Teaching Philosophy: Living a Curriculum of Joy in Nutrition and Dietetics

“A curriculum of joy is a lived and living curriculum, always generated by questing and questioning, by searching and re-searching. A curriculum of joy is always connected to experiences of the body, heart, imagination, and mind” (Leggo, 2004, p. 32).



Learning and teaching is informed by curriculum, which is defined in our profession as an educational plan which includes content, instructional methods and evaluation measures (Accreditation Committee, 1998). This definition emphasizes curriculum-as-plan, but speaks less to curriculum-as-lived. Given that food can be experienced as embodied, relational, and joyful, my learning and teaching philosophy regarding nutrition and dietetics is similarly underpinned by a living curriculum that privileges embodiment, relationality, and joy as fittingly demonstrated by my daughter (left).

In speaking of my teaching philosophy, I also speak of my learning philosophy. I come to teaching with the belief that knowledge is co-created (socially constructed), thus students’ learning reflects and influences my learning. The curriculum comes to be seen as lived when students and teachers bring their lives to bear on what is being learned. Bruce (2007) asks, “How can we understand experience as an ongoing process calling forth the living concepts in our pedagogy?” (p. 421). The experiences of students and educators (co-learners) are central to the process of learning. This is learning that is indelibly connected to the immediacy of our lives. This is learning that has the potential to change the way we think and act. This is an evocative and joyful curriculum that is continually regenerated through questing and questioning, searching and researching.

I believe that the purpose of teaching is to support students and educators in addressing and resolving complex social problems, locally and globally. My teaching philosophy reflects my commitment to this purpose. In addition to engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I endeavour to make congruent the goals for student learning, the enactment of those goals, and the assessment of those goals in a manner that excites and inspires our ability to address and resolve complex social problems, especially those related to food and nutrition.

As bell hooks (1994) shares, “excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process” (p. 7). Excitement as expressed through a curriculum of joy carries a generative learning potential. Paul Chu¹, a student in my FNP 200 (Interpersonal Relationships) class wrote, “What I have experienced in this class totally fulfilled hooks’ idea of classroom excitement. In each class, you ask us open-ended questions that require critical thinking. By doing this, it made me feel connected to this class, and gave me the chance to learn more from others.” Paul’s feedback helps me to know that by creating environments for critical thinking, I am fostering a curriculum of joy and excitement that has the potential to engage students in their lives and the lives of those around them.

¹ Students’ names have been changed.

Feedback like Paul's is crucial to my understanding of how the curriculum is responding to students' needs, expectations, and learning experiences. In addition to asking students for end-of-term feedback on their learning experiences, which I use to enhance the next offering of the course, I invite students to submit midway feedback about what is working well, what is not working well, what could be changed, and what should stay the same in the course. Midterm comments from students in FNP 200 for instance, had me providing a loose agenda by email a few days prior to class, allowing more time for discussion of course readings during class, and providing examples for the how the course material related to the final exam. During each class, I check in regularly with students by asking what learning they are experiencing through the writing, speaking, thinking, and experiential activities I facilitate as well as asking students at the end of class to write down what questions about the content have emerged or remain since the beginning of the class. I value immensely the feedback I receive and use it as a bridge to the topics in the next seminar, my program of teaching and learning scholarship, and my ongoing curriculum development. I am continually seeking ways to assess students' learning process, although I realize that sometimes learning only arises months or years after a course is finished (Gingras, 2004).

In my FNP 500 senior undergraduate seminar, "*The Art of Storytelling: Advances in Nutrition Counselling Practice*," I taught a course that I had conceived of during my doctoral studies (Gingras, 2009). It was important for me to evaluate the effectiveness of this course in order to determine how successful the curriculum was at reinforcing the course's overall learning objectives. I applied for a FCS Learning and Teaching Grant so I could hire a Research Assistant to facilitate the research (surveys and a focus group). After success with the grant and a thorough ethics review, the Research Assistant, Rachel McQuaid, a graduate student in Immigration and Settlement began the recruitment process. Our findings suggested that students believe storytelling is an essential part of learning, storytelling helps them see different points of view, and storytelling personalizes learning. This project like my other learning and teaching scholarly inquiry has enabled me to teach from an evidence-based perspective; my teaching is informed by my scholarship on learning and teaching.

In November 2007, I co-presented with four other FNP 500 students at the 2007 *McGraw-Hill Ryerson National Teaching, Learning, and Technology Conference*. Given that the theme of the conference was "*Students at the Centre...Transforming Education and Lives*," we decided to share how storytelling had transformed our perspectives on professional practice in food and nutrition by sharing excerpts from our stories with conference attendees. The experience was very fulfilling. The conference room was filled to capacity and there were people standing along the back wall. We started with a quote from Thomas King: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are." During the question period, the attendees had several comments and questions for us. One professor remarked that the sharing of our narratives had so moved her and she wanted to know how I, as the instructor, had taught these students to write so beautifully. I encouraged the students to respond, since they were the authors of their own stories. I will never forget what Jennie Price said: "I don't know that I learned this from Jacqui, but what I did learn is that if a story needs to be told, it will come out, you just need a reason to tell it and that is what Jacqui gave us, an invitation to tell our stories."

Anyone who values co-constructed learning will know the joy such a moment evokes. Jennie's comment also helps to emphasize that my goals for student learning are anchored in providing a learning environment where students are able to access knowledge and apply it in an ethical and socially-relevant manner. I believe story-writing and story-telling is a pedagogy of immense relational

potential, of joyfulness, and embodiment. Story-writing is a means through which writers come to know themselves and others. This is a primary goal of my teaching; that by coming to know ourselves and others, we come to know what it means to be human.

My teaching methods are facilitative in nature; I endeavour to create opportunities for students to share their questions and their insights so that they may learn ways to articulate even more questions and insights, but also so students can learn from each other. We work to create a community of learning. Given the diversity of individuals in my classroom, I deem these exchanges as ethical resources. When we hear something that is different from what we believe, an opportunity for learning is presented to us; we stand poised on “the learning edge.” This learning is grounded in another’s experience, which exemplifies how language and culture influence who we are as people in relation to each other. It is a matter of ethics that we learn each other and ourselves in order to prepare for the human dimension of our professional food and nutrition work. Students will often hear me reminding them to not let being professional get in the way of being human. This statement reinforces that being human is a fundamental approach to resolving complex social problems, such as food insecurity, homelessness, and cultural food violence. We need to be able to respond empathically and ethically when we hear of a mom’s struggle to feed her children, to provide them shelter, and to keep them safe. It is vital that the classroom be a place where students can practice the art of being human. Storytelling, participatory/team learning, and simulation are three means for learning in my classroom; means by which students’ bodies, hearts, imaginations, and minds are actively engaged.

An aspect of my scholarship on learning and teaching is ongoing self-reflexivity with regards to my teaching practice. The primary reason I decided to participate in a three-day Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) held December 8-10, 2008 was to re-examine my teaching practices and seek feedback from others. My teaching practice was not only enhanced, but renewed through the intensive and collaborative nature of the workshop.

My teaching philosophy is infused by my valuing and deep respect for human relatedness and connection. My strengths as an educator come not from telling students what they need to know, but from creating a safe and generative space where learning is co-constructed in dialogue with each other so learning emerges in the crucible of these relationships. At the beginning of each course, I invite students to astonish me with their participation, their learning, and their engagement in the course. Many students have indeed astonished me for these reasons and more. I have found most students to be truly engaged with course material and share work that is insightful, articulate, and critical. Having the experience of students rising to meet my invitation to be astonished has moved me to encourage even more from students, trusting that they are capable and willing to explore deeply the learning possibilities that exist. It is important for me to continue to extend this invitation to be astonished and at the same time acknowledge that for each individual student (including myself), something transformative is possible in our classroom. This is learning infused by living a curriculum of joy. This is learning that I strive for everyday. This is learning that matters...to me.

References

- Accreditation Committee. (1998). *Accreditation manual for baccalaureate programs in dietetic education*. Toronto: Dietitians of Canada.
- Bruce, A. (2007). Living curricular concepts: Opening pedagogical spaces. In L. E. Young & B. L. Paterson (Eds.), *Teaching nursing: developing a student-centred learning environment* (pp. 420-433). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Gingras, J. (2004). Like cold water or a kiss: reflections on transformative teaching. In M. G. Smith & L. Peterat & M. L. de Zwart (Eds.), *Home economics now: transformative practice, ecology, and everyday life. A tribute to the scholarship of Eleanore Vaines*. (pp. 67-75). Vancouver, BC: Pacific Educational Press.
- Gingras, J. (2009). *Longing for recognition: the joys, complexities, and contradictions of practicing dietetics*. York, England: Raw Nerve Books.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Leggo, C. (2004). The curriculum of joy: Six poetic ruminations. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 2(2), 27-42.