

## **Provost's Innovative Teaching Award**

### **Statement of Philosophy**

**Marni Binder, School of Early Childhood Studies**

**Faculty of Community Services**

Curriculum is more than pieces of information, more than subject matter, more even than the disciplines. Curriculum is an ongoing engagement with the problem of determining what knowledge and experiences are the most worthwhile. With each person and with each situation, that problem takes on different shadings and different meanings. (Ayers, 2010, p. 98)

My teaching and learning experiences have afforded me the privilege of working with a range of learners, from young children to undergraduate and graduate university students. Irrespective of who I am teaching, I have always also considered myself to be a life-long learner. My pedagogy of teaching and learning draws on the concept of holistic education, on creativity, and on a social constructivist approach to critical inquiry in which knowledge is co-constructed between students and between students and teacher. The environment of critical inquiry I aim to create in the classroom challenges students' familiar understandings and practices and stretches their perceptions of teaching and learning in the field. My pedagogy not only draws on my experiences from teaching now in two universities but from teaching primary education in Toronto's inner city. This is where I developed a deep understanding of the importance of attending to the students' sociocultural differences, the significance of community and exploring alternative creative practices to engage student learning. The children and families were also my teachers.

I have learned to combine a critical lens with advocacy in my curriculum development and implementation for both undergraduate and graduate students. I strive to create a teaching and learning community that affirms diverse voices and experiences, encouraging respect and growth. My research and teaching continually weave together, rooting my work in the scholarship of teaching and learning. My students have positively reflected on my ability to do this through numerous unsolicited emails over the years, such as: "I wanted to thank you for all you do week after week. You give us all a comfortable space where our questions and comments are encouraged and welcomed which, I believe, happens not often enough in university level classrooms" and "you have become a real influence on my own philosophy of education". While affirming and valued, I also approach my role as an educator with reflexivity, which has led to innovative teaching approaches. Teaching and learning cannot be done in isolation but through the active participation and engagement with others.

My undergraduate and graduate classes are often a mix of older learners, professionals, and young students with and without experience in the field, and come from a variety of demographic backgrounds. I enjoy the challenge of finding the balance in learning styles and approaches that engages all of them and allows them to draw on their own "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amati, Neff, & González, 2005). By providing opportunities for students to share their prior learning experiences, I am able to understand where their learning has been situated. Through reflecting on faculty course surveys, and reading the literature on teaching and learning (see Fink, 2003), my course designs offer opportunities for students to explore theory and connect to practice in collaborative ways. Unique assignments allow students to learn from each other, but develop efficacy in different formats and approaches to their own learning. Innovation in teaching should offer spaces for risk-taking, modeling of multimodal approaches to learning and promote critical and creative thinking.

For example, last year, in my Transformative Literacy course, instead of having graduate students do a standard PowerPoint presentation for an in-depth observation of an early learning environment and connection to theory, I implemented the use of the "Pecha Kucha". Unlike PPT presentations and the reliance on reading, the Pecha Kucha's structure only allows presenters 20 slides

timed to display for only 20 seconds (Klontzin, Paladino, Johnston & Divine, 2010), limiting the presentation time to 6 minutes and 40 seconds. Students were encouraged to use just images of their observation visits and speak to them, as well as connect to related theory. This innovative approach encourages students to focus on the essence of what they want to communicate. While I introduced, provided guidelines and video examples, this winter I implemented its use as an introduction to the course. When speaking to a graduate student from last year who found this approach to be exciting and transformative, I asked if he would send me some thoughts on the experience. He wrote:

*I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to present a Pecha Kucha to my colleagues for the course Transformative Literacy. This was an innovative experience put forth as an assignment. A picture is worth a thousand words, but what words from that 1000 do I pick to talk about in 20 seconds? That is one of the reasons why I enjoyed this experience. It was no surprise that Dr. Binder chose a Pecha Kucha for an assignment on transformative literacy. It was a transformative process that expanded and improved upon the ways on how students conducted presentations. Being concise and cognisant of the subject matter were critical components to the success of this presentation. The inclusion of only pictures and the absence of words meant that each student could interpret pictures differently. There were moments where students observed pictures in their own way, which generated discussions afterwards. This innovative and transformative style of presentation should be used more throughout one's graduate experience.*

Students build scholarly capacities when engaged in experiences that bring together active learning, critical thinking, and aesthetic and artistic endeavours. In my graduate course, the students engage in a bricolage activity (using found materials) to visually, verbally and/or textually represent their understanding of the course material in the last class, crystallizing their theoretical understanding of critical pedagogy in an artistic mode.

In a fourth year course assignment for Child in a Diverse Society, students constructed 'identity quilt squares'. In this project students were asked to use personal artifacts, images and text and create a quilt square with an accompanying poem to critically explore the tensions between their personal and professional worlds and how this informed their role as educators. We then created the quilt, as students laid down their squares in the centre of the room and read their poems with an accompanying soundscape. This provided ownership over their reflective learning and gave them an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in an aesthetic and artistic experience that legitimized this alternative approach to learning.

Innovation defines the quality of mentorship I offer my students. While encouraging students to be curious, reflexive, and respectful when listening to the ideas of their peers, I too become a participant in this community of learners. The importance of their relational potentials through learning with and through each other is critical to their growth in scholarship, shifts in paradigms and their pedagogical lens. An example of how I incorporate their thoughts and ideas on a course is at the beginning of each term. I ask the students (anonymously if they preferred) to write down their expectations of the course, what they hoped to gain and any challenges they foresee. Mid-way through the course I ask for written feedback to several questions (names optional) on how the course is going, validating their opinions. This feedback, as well as checking in with students at the beginning of each class, provides opportunities for them to be co-contributors to the learning that takes place.

I begin each class with mindfulness breath work, a holistic approach to support learning and to bring students together as a community of learners, by focusing on their well-being first. I have been doing this for several years. Students have indicated, as have faculty members who have come to sessions I have helped facilitate or participate in, that this practice is not common at the university level. Many of my students have expressed how this has assisted with personal issues, such as anxiety and depression and has allowed them to focus in class. I now bring this work to sessions for faculty

members. This important inclusion into my class was a contributing factor (among many) for receiving the Sue Williams Teaching Award.

Another critical aspect of my teaching is making conscious and innovative changes to my curriculum design to incorporate important new modalities (see Rientes, Brouwer & Lygo- Baker, 2012). For example, in Literacy in the Early Years, two literacy blog post assignments were created to demonstrate the importance of engaging in digital applications to literacy learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to facilitate students' understanding of new literacies theory. Working with blogs initially modeled my own risk-taking, as this was my first time working with blogs. This is an example of collaboration in learning, my engagement with current research and demonstrating my own risk-taking with new material.

I bring the creative arts into all my courses (outside of the creative arts course taught in second year). A final example is a drama and literacy session I engage third year students in. Through a series of movement and drama activities working with a social justice picture book, I open up a safe space for students to explore how to deal with sensitive issues with children. In going through these experiences, the students also reflect on their own understandings and misconceptions. I have observed huge growth in personal risk-taking and shifts in thinking. I presented a workshop using these approaches in exploring how to discuss sensitive issues, specifically residential schools with children for the *Educating for Peace and Justice Conference: Action for Safe and Equitable Classrooms, Schools and Communities* at OISE/UT in January 2017.

I have always been a reflective practitioner. From my work as an educator in the inner city to a seamless transfer to university, I have consistently explored original ways to engage students that draw on their imagination, creativity and capacity for critical thinking. My arts-based education research informs my teaching which in turn informs my research. I do not view a separation but an intricate interconnection that has contributed to my commitment to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Education is about pushing boundaries, challenging the status quo and giving students a myriad of tools to become change agents in an increasingly complex world.

I view my work with students as a gift and a privilege for the past 10 years. The more I challenge my own use of innovative methods and design, the more I see the passion and commitment emerge from the students, and as I learn from them. Watching communities of practice grow enhances the connections I feel, not only to the students, but also to colleagues who share similar interdisciplinary perspectives. This ongoing commitment to teaching and learning is what I bring to my classes, empowering the students to challenge their own capacities as future educators and scholars. As Anne Harris (2016), a colleague at Monash University advocates: "We are experiential beings and as such we seek out for tactile and embodied experiences of the new- this will not end" (p. xii).

#### References

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