

Teaching Philosophy

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After twenty-six years of teaching I can still say that my love of teaching is central to what I do and who I am. I am constantly challenged to learn in new and different ways by my encounters with students which continues to be exciting and also humbling at times. Teaching is not about me, but more importantly about how I engage, connect, understand and value what each student brings to the learning process. It is a privilege to have opportunities to get to know, on many different levels, a diversity of people and their own world views for short yet intense time frames. This in itself contributes to my own learning and understanding of the world and helps to open up and broaden my own perspectives on this.

I believe teaching is about making connections to the world around us, to making sense of abstract and conceptual ideas and helping them to become relevant to us and therefore meaningful. It is about challenging our perceived views so that learning can become transformational rather than simply a provision of information giving and acknowledgement of experience.

I believe students bring their lived experience, knowledge and skills to the learning process and I try and encourage students to value learning as a process, one where collaboration, reciprocity and mutuality are central. The process of collaboration is very much at the root of what I think teaching and learning is about: a collaboration between teacher and student towards creating new ideas and ways of thinking, to question, to critique, to challenge and to explore differing perspectives. The sharing of knowledge and the valuing of learning from one another reinforces this process. Because I believe teaching is a reflexive process, one of mutual influence, there is inherently a sharing of power within this teaching/learning context. This can foster a sense of belonging and connection that contributes to feelings of empowerment and can create opportunities for opening up new ways of knowing, thinking and doing. By being able to share 'the power' in the teaching process it promotes mutual respect for differences in how knowledge is developed, acknowledged, generated and perceived as legitimate. This translates into students being able to see that their own contributions, insights, experiences, views and understandings are all equally valid and have a right to be voiced and acknowledged.

My commitment to this type of teaching philosophy means that I must consistently work hard to be innovative and creative in how students become engaged with the course material. In order to engage students in their learning and support them to take risks with voicing their ideas/views, I believe it is essential to create a safe environment where respect for one another is crucial and open dialogue is able to occur. What I like to do is invite students to take a 'journey of learning' which is not always comfortable and easy, but hopefully, results in not only learning about the content but about themselves as well. One way I do this is by the development of a final exit paper in my fourth year theory of practice course. The paper is about their learning journey and how they have developed and grown in the development of their professional identity along with what theoretical perspectives have contributed to this. This paper assists in the application and linkage of theory to their own practice and becomes meaningful and relevant to them. Student feedback on this assignment has highlighted how helpful this was and reinforced their learning. It also provides opportunities for them to develop new awareness about their professional and personal self which is so crucial within social work practice.

The development of a learning agreement/guidelines becomes important at the start of a course so that expectations are concrete and transparent. Frequent opportunities for students to provide feedback on what is working and what is not, allows for check-ins as to what if any changes need to be made. An end of term feedback for me is extremely helpful as it provides me with a 'view' to seeing how the learning process can become more inclusive based on the diversity of a learning styles and stages. I also find this type of feedback can be reaffirming, but it also challenges me to be open and flexible in finding more innovative and creative ways to present content to fit more with what their learning needs are. It is not about what I need, but what would help to facilitate meaningful and challenging learning for them. In other words, students teach me about teaching. Learning then becomes relevant to their understanding of their own reality.

In order to put my beliefs and what I value in the process of teaching and learning, I have found it essential to try and develop ways to practice what I preach. This has led me in the direction of seeking out and working to develop innovative approaches for students to experience different forms of learning. I am excited, challenged and sometimes quite anxious about using experiential methods in the classroom such as live simulations or charrettes, as you can never completely plan what will happen as the process/experience unfolds. Although I am clear about the learning objectives, the 'letting go' of traditional notions of how these objectives will be achieved is exciting and at times unnerving. The motto here really is expect the unexpected. Experiential learning allows for active and engaged participation from students. It creates an environment that allows for risk taking and experiencing the learning that becomes real rather than strictly removed from their lived experience and only theoretical. To be able to apply, experience, reflect and as a result link this process of learning to their practice often translates into new and different

transformational learning.

My commitment to experiential learning and the necessity of understanding things from multiple critical perspectives, has motivated me to find ways to develop opportunities across the University in order for this to happen. My wanting to challenge the boundaries that can constrict learning, reinforces my valuing of interdisciplinary/inter-professional educational experiences. Being able to work collaboratively with other faculty and students towards developing interdisciplinary opportunities has contributed significantly to broadening my own view of teaching and allowed me to see teaching as learning where I am also a participant in the process, a facilitator, co-learner, model, and mentor.

I am constantly challenged about how to put my values and beliefs into practice. What helps me most is that I basically really like and enjoy students and have this desire to get to know each one on some level and help them become more aware of their strengths and abilities and what motivates them in their learning. Interdisciplinary/inter-professional opportunities and experiences have contributed to this in ways that have fostered greater learning by being able to move outside the limits of my own discipline. To be able to work with people collaboratively from a variety of different disciplines is exciting and motivating for me. I find this approach stimulates my creativity and challenges me to think differently about approaches and ways of doing things.

In reflecting on my teaching philosophy I recognize that it is not always easy to put these values and beliefs into practice. I struggle at times with this and the challenges that are part of it, but I do know that my commitment to this philosophy, even after all these years, is still very strong and deeply rooted within me. My own learning journey is constantly evolving and I hopefully can continue on this journey of creating change and working with others to develop new, challenging and exciting learning opportunities within a variety of different contexts.