

# Teaching Philosophy

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Quality is at the heart of education, and what takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people and adults. A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs, and enriches the lives of learners and their overall experience of living. UNESCO (2000, p. 20)

The goal of creating 'quality educational environments' is at the heart of my approach to teaching and learning. Quality educational environments can be created in any physical space. A superior environment results in the mutual engagement of students and teachers in the learning enterprise. The role of the teacher is to provide the stimuli that will result in a collaborative learning experience. It is not our role to 'fill the empty vessel', but it is to use our experience and knowledge to maximize the students' opportunities to explore, evaluate, and integrate the core beliefs and wisdom of their field of study.

In the following I will reflect on the theorists and practitioners that have influenced my educational practice, discuss the concept of integration of educational activities, consider strategies for responding to diversity needs and backgrounds of the students, consider the impact of the arts on my educational beliefs, introduce some of my educational practices, and finally talk about my role in the educational community beyond the classroom.

## Influences

At the beginning of my teaching career, I was strongly influenced by constructivism. Specifically, I was intrigued by the idea that meaning is constructed from existing knowledge structures, which provide the foundation and/or framework for developing new knowledge. I was challenged by Dewey's (1938) concept that learning was not the process of ingesting facts, but that it was a process of learning by doing. Education starts with the learner's existing knowledge. It is the teacher's responsibility to foster the development of learning strategies so that students can construct new knowledge from their experiences and prior understandings. The teacher is not a font of knowledge, but is a facilitator who creates the environment and provides tactics for learning. Vygotskii (1978) believes that the teacher intervenes in cognitive development by creating a scaffold to support learning. The teacher's role is to assess the current development of the student and then move beyond this to challenge the student to build new knowledge structures. (Leat and Nichols, 1997. Gindis, 1998) As I started to apply these ideas to teaching university students (in contrast with teaching young children), I realised that I had no role models for the 'teacher as facilitator' from my own years as a university student. Fortunately, I quickly found many kindred souls amongst my colleagues worked with them to develop myself as a teacher-facilitator.

Although I found (and still do find) the constructivist focus on the students as the centre of the educational process very useful, I developed concerns about the constructivists' single-minded attention to learning outcomes at the expense of attending to learning processes. I observed that many students achieve learning outcomes in a course, but that they value the strategies that they have developed for thinking and learning. For example, most students in my research design courses were able to complete a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, but they would say that is more important to know how the concept of statistical relationship is used. The analytic process was more important than the mechanical calculation. These doubts lead to seek other educational philosophies that would complement and extend constructivist ideas. Freire (1998) politicizes the process of education by defining education as a liberating act that gives the learner freedom to think and theorize. It is consistent with the learner-centred approach of the constructivists, but it removes the oppression of outcomes from education. The outcome is not externally defined, but it is based on the needs and goals of the student. For me, Freire's framework would be used to transform educational institutions. They would become collectives of learners interested in pursuing the consideration of intellectual and practical problems. The teacher would help structure the process, but would not evaluate or judge the outcome. This would be my ideal, but it does not match the reality of professional education. Nevertheless, I have found that Freire's beliefs have helped me design assignments that maintain a respect for the "autonomy of the student" (p. 59).

So as a neo-constructivist and a wannabe anarchist-educator, I continue to explore alternative epistemologies and teaching approaches. Post-modernist thought and its implications for teaching have intrigued me recently. Parker's (1997) consideration of post-modernist reflective teaching confronts many of the assumptions of contemporary education. One of the most intriguing ideas presented by Parker is the process of creating dissonance in the classroom. This is used to pull apart accepted and new theories so that their true meaning can be understood.

Another profound influence on my convictions about teaching and learning is the work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) on qualitative research. Through exploration of their ideas about the nature of research, I began to see teaching as a

qualitative research process. As one's teaching evolves, it is a process of identifying the key questions and problems of teaching. Using a qualitative approach it is possible to develop grounded theories about teaching which can be applied in the continuing evolution of work in education.

The above discussion outlines the main influences on my beliefs about teaching, but I must note that many other theorists have influenced my thinking. From these influences I strongly believe that teaching is a process that focuses on students as individuals to encourage their intellectual growth and curiosity. The practice of teaching focuses on creating a supportive educational environment that facilitates learning. Finally it includes a questioning attitude that leads to a continual evolution of the way a teacher works.

## **Practices**

The following provides examples of how my philosophy is demonstrated in my day to day practice.

### ***Integration***

In the preceding text I stressed the importance of using our experience and knowledge to maximize the students' opportunities to explore, evaluate, and integrate the core beliefs and wisdom of their field of study. How does this happen?

One of the most important tools for me is the course syllabus. A well designed syllabus will not only lay out the expectations of the course, but will give students an outline of the variety of learning opportunities in the course. Beyond that, it will explicitly outline the relationship between different assignments. Appendix A contains the course outline for CLD 121. I believe this demonstrates the integration of learning opportunities. For example, lectures, in-class activities, readings and the Charette assignment all build towards an understanding of professional and personal ethics. In addition, they are designed to give students the opportunity to become familiar with the United Nations Statement of Rights for Children. An interesting outcome of these learning exercises is that over 60% of the students assimilated ideas about ethics and children's rights into their final major essay, even though this was not a requirement of the essay assignment.

Many techniques and exercises in the class are used to stimulate knowledge integration. Amongst my favourites are lacing the class with mini-case studies, using examples from the popular press, discussing excellent teaching practice of students that I observe in practicum courses.

Traditional exercises such as "Think, Pair, Share" are used along with less traditional activities such as "The Name That Fallacy Television Show" (please see Appendix B). Finally, I set the class environment through the use of props and gimmicks that serve as memory tags for lecture material. For example, teddy bears become amazing teaching assistants when discussing difficult topics such as child abuse; and my Great-Great Uncle, Buffalo Bill, was used to introduce randomness in a research class.

### ***Diversity and Responsiveness***

Well designed courses, assignments and exercises are only a part of creating a successful learning environment. What did I do to create collectives of learners that respected each other individuality? First of all I was fortunate to grow up in a home and family that was close to unique in white middle-class Toronto. My father worked with physicians who were new to Canada in internships for re-establishing their specialists' qualifications. This meant that our home was a welcoming place for people from all over the world, as both my parents supported these families in their transition to Canada. I was imbued with a belief that all people should be welcomed and un-judged, no matter what their heritage. As a result respect for the individual is almost a knee jerk reaction for me. It has been easy to carry this into the learning environment.

How is this attitude reflected in my practice? I always spend a long time at the beginning of a course becoming familiar with the students and their experiences. Familiarization exercises and personal data cards are two techniques I use to assure that we all know something each other in the class. I believe it is important that I participate in these exercises as it starts to break down the 'professor-student' divide. It gives the message that their knowledge and experience is very important to the class.

An accepting attitude can also be created through small but genuine gestures. If students give me a week's notice of an upcoming absence due to a religious holiday, I tape the class for them. Use of phrases like "as early childhood educators" or "as a group of colleagues" reminds students that I see them as an important part of the profession and that I respect them as members of our shared professional group.

### ***Arts***

My personal interest in and passion for the arts is reflected in my teaching practice. I view the classroom as a

performance space in which we are all part of a creative commune. In one way I see my role as the creative director/facilitator. Boal (1985) calls the role "the joker". It is not a comedian, but it is a facilitator who keeps the learning process evolving and comments on the progress to stimulate synthesis and integration of knowledge. The "joker" can also be an accountant measuring and assessing learning to keep the course activity focused on shared goals.

Our reality is that we have few attractive or well designed teaching environments. Through the use of aesthetically pleasing PowerPoints, re-arrangement of the room and even occasional changes in lighting (e.g. using candles) an ugly environment can be transformed to support learning endeavours.

Students' long and break-free days provide another challenge, particular for teaching late in the day. I have found that being a performer can help engage students in a class no matter how tired they are. Corny jokes, the occasional costume, music, singing and even dancing can warm up a class so that we can move to working as a group of learners. I see this as pure performance which becomes a tool to support learning.

### ***The Educational Community***

These same beliefs are applied to my work in the educational community. It is an honour to have worked with GREET and the LTO for much of my career. One of the biggest challenges is to take my ideas and beliefs to different disciplines. It is a must that the principles of respect and inclusiveness that are at the core of my work with students become the foundation of work in learning and teaching support. Starting any activity with explorations of how members of the group work as educators is critical. Activities such as micro-teaching workshops are ideal ways of creating mutual learning that enhances all our work.

Equally important is applying these beliefs to SRC. The Projeto de Artis é Educação started with an expressed need from our partners in Brazil. The essential concept of using the arts as the basis of and the vehicle for teacher education came from the mutual identification of shared skills and interests in the arts. All of the participants in the project are proud of the outcome as it reflects our shared educational beliefs. Please see appendices C, D and E, for executive summaries of SRC projects that reflect my philosophy.

The development of the Early Childhood Education Music Certificate with late Donna Wood is another example of my applied philosophy. Much of the excitement for us as certificate designers was the opportunity to find shared passion in two somewhat disparate disciplines to meet a true learning need that responded to an identified need in the community.

### ***Summary***

A few years ago I made a presentation about 'Playfulness' in education. It not only presents a conviction that educators need to be playful in their work, but also that learning and teaching is fun. In many ways this summarizes my educational philosophy. The teaching profession is challenging and hard work, but it is one of the most stimulating and interesting occupations. Personally I think I have never really 'gone to work', rather I have been paid to play in and explore the fascinating world of learning and teaching.