

Teaching Philosophy

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Indiana Jones and the Temple of Bloom

In a teacher training session I once attended, the instructor asked us to name a personal metaphor for teaching. Were we sculptors, carving and polishing young minds, or maybe gardeners, nurturing growth and weeding out poor results? This was easy. Within 10 seconds, I knew: I was the head spelunker, a cave explorer who guides students through the unknown and unseen. Sometimes leading, sometimes stumbling behind, I shine the flashlight on the secrets of an undiscovered world. I may not have every answer, but I know how and where to look. My mission is to show students that their ability to succeed has been there all along, if only they just find it.

Although that analogy was more apt when I started as a CUPE instructor, the metaphor still captures my central philosophy as a teacher. For me, teaching helps students discover and develop what they already possess - skills and abilities that will make them careful researchers, challenging analysts, informed citizens, critical thinkers and inspired journalists. I believe that this attitude explains the strong rapport that I enjoy with students. Although I remain final arbiter, they know that I respect their ideas and have confidence in their ability to become better thinkers, editors and writers. The School of Journalism's -and FCAD's - commitment to studio education has reinforced my belief that learning is discovery and has assisted my transition from journalist to professor. In my first year of teaching, I acted as a coach in the hands-on practice of reporting news, a 'sort-of' supervisor who guided students through challenges that I myself had faced working in newsrooms. I was lucky: my first class was easygoing, talkative and cohesive. A bit too dazzled by my professional background, they were forgiving of my inexperience as a teacher and ranked me as enthusiastic (1.1), responsive (1.1), respectful (1.2) and effective (1.3).

The next year, I realized how much I had to learn. My reporting class was a dispirited group. My teaching load had tripled and included copy editing, a subject that requires logistical finesse from the teacher and a huge range of disparate skills for students to master. (Copy editors do everything from rewriting lengthy articles to writing headlines to designing pages.) My stand-up comedy routine was not going to suffice.

I took advantage of every session I could attend offered by LTO and took to heart every suggestion made in my teaching assessments. However, the turning point occurred when I read *7 Kinds of Smart*, a layperson's synopsis of Howard Gardner's theories on learning. It was a revelation, a shimmering treasure in the caves.

Gardner organizes modes of thinking and learning into categories that isolate and define their components. Auditory learners acquire knowledge primarily by listening and talking, for example, more so than, say, visual learners, who prefer to see information. Gardner does not prescribe rigid rules but instead establishes a paradigm for thinking about and experimenting with pedagogy. Most people possess a range of learning styles and preferences and, so, most classes benefit from a combination of auditory, visual, kinesthetic and other approaches. To me, Gardner's brilliance is his respect for every type of learning and his enthusiasm for harnessing them.

I applied these lessons immediately and, I think, effectively, from the minutiae of course management to the explanation of overarching concepts. I realized, for example, that no matter how often I might give an instruction orally, visual learners simply had to have it written down. I began to write more on the board, prepared more handouts, drew pictures to explain abstractions, played music, had them act out roles. Morale among the discouraged writers rose as their confusion evaporated.

In copy editing, I used techniques adapted from *7 Kinds* to build confidence among students intimidated by the visual and math skills needed for layout and design. In one playful, 5-minute exercise, for example, I ask students to draw a map of the world from memory. The results are instructive and democratic in their variety, from perfect but wordless maps tracing every shoreline to schematic blobs with highly-detailed labels. What an effective (and visual) demonstration of how each brain works differently and yet also how each mind offers its own style and substance.

My exploration continued when I did specialized training in university teaching through the Poynter Fellowship at Indiana University. There were hundreds of ideas on offer about course management, presentation, instruction and assessment. Importantly for me, there was also an overview of pedagogical theory that has informed my thinking since. Yet, amid all the information available, the most important idea I gained was that I should expect more from students. Or, to put this in terms of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of abstraction, although students may know, understand and apply knowledge, we must also inspire them to analyze, synthesize and evaluate as well.

In FCAD, technique always matters but students must go beyond process, to recognize patterns in media and in public debate, to synthesize information and create new work from old formats, to evaluate ideas and theories about journalism. With journalism's very existence at risk in 2010, this is more important than ever. In Bloom, I found a

means by which I could inspire students to move up the ladder of abstraction. How rewarding those higher expectations became when I taught a group two courses, for a total of 10 hours together every week. We sped through the essentials and moved to independent inquiry that students loved -although it was many more hours of homework.

My teaching has also been shaped by my time as a part-time student at University of Toronto. (I was required as a condition of tenure to obtain an MA, which I did in June, 2004.) Again, the insights ranged from the micro to the macro. I learned how often a class needs a coffee break and how clever it is to put course outlines on coloured paper. (Students can find them.) But I also realized how thrilling it was to be in a class where I was expected to soar, where ideas and ideas about ideas were spread out on the horizon. I wanted that for my students, too, and have tried to incorporate the approaches I learned at grad school to achieve moments of awe and possibility. Is it time to talk about structuring an argument in a newspaper editorial? Let's look at Aristotle's rules of rhetoric. Shall we discuss opening sentences? Let's look at Tolstoy or Austen or Vonnegut.

Teaching for me is a journey, trite as that may sound. Every year I learn something new. Every year there are new paths to explore and new information to discover. I believe I have transmitted that habit of inquiry and exploration among my students.

I believe that my approach is in complete alignment with the goals of FCAD and the university. I hope you will agree.