

Teaching Philosophy

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Why I do what I do in the classroom is adapted to suit the specific demands of individual courses I teach and the learning requirements of each group of students, but there are certain beliefs and practices that remain foundational to my teaching philosophy. For one, I emphasize active learning strategies and exercises which allow me to both break down the learning process into its component parts—acquiring knowledge, building comprehension and analytical skills; developing the ability to synthesize information; achieving competence in applying knowledge and skills; and evaluating the results of such application—to help students take control of and measure their learning outcomes and make evident the interconnections between these components to teach students how to become lifelong learners. A direct result of this approach is that students become more inquisitive and motivated in their studies and actually enjoy the learning experience.

For another, I firmly believe that in designing a relevant syllabus—whether I am teaching a literature or a social justice course—I am better able to provide students with the intellectual tools and skills they need to compete effectively in the marketplace/workplace and contribute to improving their society. Because students learn best when they can make connections between the issues that impact on their everyday lives and what they are reading and hearing in the classroom, my courses foreground experiential learning; that is, I give students opportunities to undertake real-life applications of theoretical materials and solidify their understanding of concepts taught in the classroom through grounding complex ideas and abstractions in concrete, everyday examples.

For me, experiential learning is more than bridging the gap between the classroom and the outside world, between theory and practice. As an English professor whose teaching and research embrace the study of literature and other areas of learning in the humanities, I am not directly involved in professionally-targeted instruction in which experiential learning is synonymous with practicum experience. Rather, I focus on helping students identify where their previous experience and/or personal interests intersect with course material so that they are better equipped to decide how to make use of the knowledge and skills they have learned in determining their future work. For example, following the module on gender and sex/uality and after completing her community service requirement in my social justice course by volunteering with the social outreach group within the Upper Canada Law Society, one of my undergraduate students discovered that she wanted to specialize in feminist law. Similarly, after a semester of reading works of fiction and theory in my Immigrant Voices in Canadian Literature course with an eye to the connection between poetics and politics in these writings, one of my graduate students realized that doing her major research paper on what grassroots community theatre in immigrant enclaves in Toronto can tell us about the way marginal groups use art to dialogue with the society around them is the necessary next step to launching her career as a playwright and theatre critic.

As such, I have come to value the transformative aspects of the teaching-learning relationship in which conscientious mentoring of my students plays a significant role. I strive to do more than competently deliver instruction in the classroom and so give attention to inculcating habits of thinking, working and being, and helping students recognize and achieve their potential. Office visits are as much about discussing course information and assignments as they are about one-on-one personal chats and explorations of ideas and possibilities with students. I hold myself to the same standards I set for my students, and many of them value my honesty and transparency and the interest, time and energy I invest in our academic relationship. I often get emails from students, even after they have completed courses with me, in which they let me know of developments in their academic life or simply pass on information (newspaper stories, etc.) that they think I will find useful for my classes.

Nurturing such a relationship of mutual exchange, trust, and respect requires that I be mindful of the different learning styles and backgrounds of my students, especially when dealing with sensitive issues—as is the case with much of the content that I teach. I employ a variety of teaching strategies to create a safe and intellectually rigorous environment for addressing the issues. At the beginning of each term in my social justice course for example, I set the stage and tone for subsequent discussion sessions by sharing my own sensitive encounters and inviting students to reflect upon my response to these situations. This is done in the first meeting or two when students have very few assignments. I also read magazine stories and poems or play songs in these early classes as a means of laying bare and helping students overcome their fear of addressing the more sensitive topics. These strategies have been rewarded by students later on choosing to share their own experiences and inviting comments on their reactions in open forum, with the rest of us listening with respect and eager to learn from what was shared. These are among the moments I treasure most in my teaching. I also use reader response essays in my liberal studies courses (such as in the weeks when I cover truth and reconciliation issues in Aboriginal and South African readings) to help students sort out their emotional reactions to disturbing content, and discover their own critical voice and style in the process. A community service assignment in another course requires that students spend 3 hours volunteering with a local

organization that addresses one or more of the forms of oppression dealt with in the course, which allows them to put theory into practice and also gives them the space in which to examine their own beliefs and assumptions—on their own terms. For that assignment, each student writes a report on the community service activity undertaken and concludes the report with a paragraph reflecting on what s/he learned or how his/her perspective might have shifted as a result of completing the exercise. My course discussion forums in Blackboard have proven to be invaluable as my students and I use these forums to grapple with course content and sort through our intellectual and emotional response to the material covered beyond the spatial confines and time restrictions of the classroom.

No positive teaching-learning result is, I believe, possible if students are not made fully aware of the parameters and given a context for their course of study. As such, I prepare explicit syllabi in which I very clearly lay out course policies, expectations, descriptions of assignments and their due dates alongside desired learning outcomes, a detailed marking code, a comprehensive description of the scope and content of each course, and the weekly topics and readings—often coming up with catchy titles that capture the issues and focus for each week's lecture, discussion and activity sessions. As an English professor, I also fully appreciate that whatever the course content, the various components in the learning process are reinforced through writing. The existing scholarship on academic writing suggests that the act of writing itself brings all these components into harmony and functions as an important measurement of learning—for both student and teacher. It is in written assignments that—after all the benefits of class discussions, lectures, group presentations and activities—each student has to wrestle with communicating what s/he has learned. It is in written assignments that I work on improving my students' critical thinking and academic writing skills as a complement to the oral communication skills I foster in open discussions, debates and group presentations. It is in written assignments that I teach my students how to write critically—to question received knowledge, analyze, historicize, politicize and, overall, respond in an intelligent and informed manner to whatever is the issue at hand. To this end, all my courses are writing intensive. This does not necessarily mean that students have to produce more written work in my courses than they do in other courses; rather, writing intensive refers to a judicious combination of writing exercises, which together are designed to achieve specific learning outcomes and give students ample opportunity to learn the finer points of academic writing and self-editing.

Like my students, I approach each classroom as a learner, willing to question, adjust and revise what I think I know. I make a habit of listening as much as I speak, and I spend time reflecting on my teaching practice and keeping abreast of new pedagogies by reading a number of teaching and learning journals and newsletters and participating in teaching workshops with my colleagues. The time I spend being a learner myself has made me a more confident and effective teacher in the classroom.