

Teaching Philosophy

Peter Strahlendorf

An instructor's teaching philosophy should be unique; a reflection of the instructor's own academic history, work experience, areas of research, nature of courses taught, types of students in the class and the format (seminar, lecture, distance, intensive) of the courses taught. While universities standardize and proceduralize many things these days, diversity in teaching styles enriches the student's experience, and is an important element in academic freedom.

My academic background is in biology and law - science and humanities. These are very different academic traditions and "cultures". I don't view myself as a biologist dabbling in law, or a lawyer dabbling in biology, but as a participant in both traditions. Since I have only one brain, there has been a considerable amount of cross-fertilization, resulting in some insight and a lot of scepticism. I don't teach science quite the way scientists do, and I don't teach law the way it's taught in law schools.

In keeping with Ryerson University's polytechnic tradition, I have a broad experience in industry and in the professions. In the polytechnic tradition, good teaching comes from continued interaction with industry and the professions. The understanding is that new knowledge, issues and innovations often arise from practice. Teaching students who are destined for industry and the professions requires a flow of knowledge from the outside world into the classroom. The purely academic perspective, not of the polytechnic tradition, views good teaching to be the result of good research, and that the university is the source of new knowledge. New knowledge flows from the laboratory to the class and then to industry and the professions. The optimal situation in the classroom is neither extreme, but a healthy integration of new knowledge from both sources.

As Ryerson evolves from a polytechnic to something closer to a generic university, what is sometimes over-looked is the expectations of students. When students come to the classroom most of them are not expecting to become academics; they are expecting to be equipped for careers in industry and the professions. In the polytechnic tradition, that was fully understood. In the generic university, there is risk of students' expectations being viewed with less concern by the pure academic. Some faculty who primarily enjoy research have said that teaching is the price one must pay in order to have the privilege of doing research. I don't agree with that view, as it implicitly downgrades our primary mission at SOPH. SOPH is one of the schools at Ryerson that was created for the purpose of educating professionals; in our case for two identifiable, definable and predictable careers - public health inspectors and occupational health and safety managers. A large portion of our undergraduate student body already have university degrees - in subjects that are not so related to particular careers. Hence, our students' expectations are very high, much higher than in a generic university, that teaching in the classroom will be relevant to their expected careers. The content of our curriculum is closely related to the expectations of external professional certifying bodies. Given our origins, our purpose, the expectations of our students and of our professional communities, teaching is of the highest importance in SOPH

Teaching that is open to a continual influence by our professional communities is critical. We discussed violence in the workplace as an OHS issue (and not merely a criminal issue) 15 years before Ontario's legislation changed to include it. The reverse flow is also important. Many OHS practitioners, under the influence of US-based consulting firms marketing their products, believe "behavioural psychology" is cutting edge science, and have never heard of the more modern "cognitive psychology". At Ryerson, I believe we should never simply teach what our professional communities want us to teach their future members. Often professional practice is wrong or out-dated. I view the classroom as a crucible into which new issues and insights flow from both work experience and research. I don't think the classroom should be merely the nexus of two passive flows of information, but that classroom debate and discussion can give rise to new ideas out of the original material from the two sources. I do not think it is as simple as "theory" from academia and "practice" from the professions; I can think of many instances over the years where that the common perception has been inverted. Overall, I would say that Ryerson, with its polytechnic origin, has been a place where the "crucible model" of the classroom has done well, and I have enjoyed participating in it.

At many conventional universities there has been a concerted effort to become more "interdisciplinary" - to break down the walls between traditional disciplines. One of the things that attracted me to Ryerson over 20 years ago was an atmosphere of informality about disciplinary boundaries. That may be changing now, and the irony of having other universities become more like Ryerson, as Ryerson strives to move towards the generic university, is increasingly clear. It is partly a reflection of our applied, professional perspective that Ryerson has always been strongly interdisciplinary in its educational culture. I find it very satisfying to discuss psychology, moral philosophy, law and toxicology all in the same lecture. I have always felt at home, with my mixed background, teaching at Ryerson.

One characteristic of my teaching style is the influence of both academic traditions in my own background - a visual style from the sciences and a verbal Socratic style from law. I almost always teach with visual material on the screen

with a verbal parallel presentation. I teach law in a way that is very dissimilar to how law is taught in law schools - far more visual. I teach science in a more Socratic style than is customary. I think a weakness in science teaching is the passivity of the class relative to a humanities class in which the Socratic method is used. The Socratic method assumes that students can find the answers to questions from their own experience and reason. It is very often an unsuitable method in science. Where the course content is science-based, but is also very practical or applied, as most of the SOPH courses are, then the Socratic method is useful with regards to implications, examples, decision-making under uncertainty, etc. The Socratic method requires that the teacher be flexible enough to repeatedly and extensively depart from lecture notes to pursue lines of enquiry with individual students in the class. In fact, I don't use lecture notes in the traditional manner. I am guided by the visual material on the screen but speak without notes ... and, particularly when attention seems to be waning, try to draw examples, implications, alternate meanings, applications and contrary views from the students.

Teaching a course in Continuing Education has a very positive effect on teaching the same course in the full-time program. I have had the benefit of teaching many of the SOPH courses to CE students, who are generally much older, and usually very much more experienced. Such mature students are not shy about offering their experiences with the issues in the course material. A student who is working in OHS as an OHS coordinator for a company can describe his or her handling of a work refusal case, or the interaction with a regulatory inspector, where such stories are unlikely to come from the younger SOPH students. Their applications, stories, criticisms, and subtleties greatly improve the insight with which I can use the materials with the SOPH students. CE students come from a wide variety of work sectors - much of the content of OHS knowledge has to be adapted moving from one sector to another. Those multiple perspectives from a CE course can be brought into the SOPH class. As well, CE has a wider range of formats for course delivery. I developed the print based distance education (DE) versions of three SOPH courses (prior to the shift to web-based DE courses). The discipline of converting class room lectures into written and visual material that can be used by a student working alone feeds back to improve the materials used in the SOPH classroom. There is an improving discipline to delivering a 14 week course into a 42 hour one week intensive course - where nothing can go wrong with the logistics, materials, tempo - and where you are forced to keep students engaged for far longer periods of time than in any ordinary class.

I should add something in particular about teaching law courses to SOPH students - who will not be practicing law as lawyers. When you ask "why are we studying law?" in a law school, the answer is "we might have to give someone advice about this some day". When we ask that question to SOPH students, the answer for the PH students is "we will be enforcing this law" and for the OHS students "we will be complying with this law". It helps engage students when the perspective is: "when you are an inspector", "when you are in court prosecuting for breach of this section..." and "when you are advising senior management about the implications of this change in the law ...", "when you receive an Order from the inspector to comply with this section ...". Law school students know that they will not be practising in entire areas of law, and much of the content of the law school courses is not what they will have a personal involvement with. SOPH students, on the other hand, have a much more intimate and personal relationship with very specific areas of law ("this is your Act"). It is an important part of my teaching philosophy that we keep coming back to why studying the material will matter very much to the student in a personal way into the future.

There are those who believe that law is relatively simple - anyone who can read, can read statutes and cases, and understand the law. Not much need to teach. No complex math or equipment needed. But law is one of the oldest disciplines and is a mature subject in its own right; it is not mere language. If teaching law is merely a matter of reading, then teaching law must inevitably consist of reading sections of an Act off the screen - what some people call "black letter law" ("this is what the law is"). Law is not a science and it is based largely on textual analysis. Law is highly dependant on understanding legal concepts, on being able to find very specific legal sources, on using the concepts in textual analysis, applying the law to a particular factual problem. Whether students are aware of it or not at the time, when working through large volumes of primary source legal materials, they develop the ability to understand legal textual material by applying definitions, by applying the purpose of the text to an analysis of the meaning of a part of the text, by linking parts of the text to each other, by applying the policy or background philosophy of the text (e.g. the IRS) to the meaning of the parts. You don't learn to ride a bicycle by simply reading the instruction manual. You don't learn to think like a lawyer or a judge by reading about the law, but only by participating within legal analysis. I mention this because I think some students find the volume of work in the SOPH law courses to be excessive - but it's a particular method of learning that suits the subject.

Historically, non-lawyers were at the mercy of the "legal priesthood" in obtaining and understanding the law. Up until 15 years ago if you wanted to know what the law was on a subject, you had to ask a lawyer. Either that, or you had to physically travel to a law library (which are immense) and figure out how to use it. The internet has democratized access to law. Within minutes our graduates are able to obtain the text of any Act, regulation, case or Board decision relevant to their problem. Even so, when searching, you have to ask the right questions, and use the right terminology. When looking at a source on the Web, our graduates will be able to apply their knowledge of legal concepts and their textual analysis skills to make sense of what they're looking at. Without an understanding of the structure and function of the legal system it is hard to tell the relevance or reliability of a source of law. Our graduates will be much more capable of using the public's new access to legal materials than un-trained members of the public. Putting it another way, an unstated, implicit agenda in the way I teach law is that our graduates will be able to pick up

any regulatory legal materials for any Canadian jurisdiction they end up in, and quickly be able to make sense of the legal text and apply it. They learn not only what the law is, but they learn generic, legal analytical skills that are transferable to areas of law they have not yet encountered.

A characteristic of my teaching style is the use of real life anecdotes and stories. In part, this style comes from the reliance in law schools on the case law method; cases being, in essence, stories. I also believe, as a matter of evolutionary psychology, that people by their nature, learn largely from face-to-face story-telling. I try to draw on a large collection of cases, news-clippings and industry anecdotal experiences to illustrate problems, conflicts, alternate resolutions, and so on.

I am told by many students that they appreciate my dry sense of humour. They say that the use of humour in the class makes an otherwise dry and boring topic very interesting. My only objection to that observation would be that I don't find any of the subjects I teach to be dry or boring.