

## Teaching Philosophy

A liberal education is critical, as it provides a world-view that integrates our responsibilities to our environment with responsibilities to our human society. A liberal education prepares students to face the challenges of a changing world. It also provides the basis for understanding difficult questions that are complex and interdisciplinary in nature and require a broad range of knowledge to grasp.

I view learning as the foundation for future decisions by people who enter a variety of careers, not solely in their major. Learning is a personal process that involves acquiring new information and incorporating that information into a world-view. Learning also involves applying previously obtained knowledge in a new way or to a different situation or reprocessing information previously misconstrued. An important aspect of the learning process is to express the limitations and underlying assumptions of a subject. I communicate the necessity of drawing from a range of disciplines to make basic decisions. My goal as an educator is to stimulate a desire for life-long learning from the basis of a liberal education.

My introduction to the demands of an educator was as a junior and senior high school math teacher. After only three years at the private school, I was honored that the students dedicated the yearbook to me. As a graduate student at Stanford University, I was a teaching assistant and was named a Stanford Centennial Teaching Assistant, awarded for outstanding teaching. I have taught a variety of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels and the student evaluations of my teaching have been positive.

My teaching uses active learning methods to excite students to pursue knowledge and understanding and to enable them to incorporate a variety of ideas into a coherent ideology. My challenge is to stimulate students through clear explanations of complex topics and to emphasize the importance and application of that topic. My goal is to make learning fun and interesting. I try to engage the students in the material by asking questions and allowing them time to reflect and respond. Occasionally, I group students to solve small example problems, then work through the answers with them. I also try to share my perspective on the material through examples of how I use the information or recounting my own difficulties learning the material. I feel strongly that critical thinking and the ability to communicate are essential skills for all. The significance of a particular subject or exercise should be presented so that students see the link between classroom learning and real-world applications.

As an example of my teaching philosophy, I emphasize written communication in my courses. A major focus of an introductory, non-science major course was an 800 word term paper. The students submitted three drafts during the semester so I could work with them on content and writing style before they finalized their paper and received a final grade.

I am passionate about teaching and bringing active learning into the classroom. I enjoy interacting with young adults; in the classroom, in the field, in the lab, and in the hall. I

have a strong rapport with them and I believe I have their respect as a mentor. Their excitement, curiosity, and energy challenges and stimulates me to match their enthusiasm. I try to be honest and candid with them. I treat students like the adults they are, while understanding they are inexperienced and need guidance and nurturing. In short, I try to show the students that I am human like them.

A critical component of my teaching is to receive feedback before and during the semester. I have other faculty review my syllabi. I video-taped a lecture of mine and had a teaching expert evaluate my strengths and weaknesses. Such constructive feedback greatly improved my classroom teaching. Last semester, I taught a course in tandem with another section. To ensure that the students were learning comparably, we gave a common exam. This comparison indicated that I was presenting the appropriate information and that the students were learning the material. This exercise increased my confidence in my teaching ability. As another feedback mechanism, I have students write “minute papers” to comment on the course. These short statements are invaluable. They show me ways to improve while the class is ongoing and they allow the students to take ownership of their learning by having input into the teaching process. I believe asking the students their opinion gets them thinking about the course and how successfully they are learning the material.

An important aspect of my future teaching will be to spend time at the beginning of the semester to show students how to become better learners. I will have the students read several articles and book excerpts about learning styles, traits of successful students, and critical thinking. I think many students do not have a learning strategy or have not fully implemented a strategy. By presenting learning models and traits at the beginning of the semester, I hope to increase the amount and depth of their learning experience.

Recently I taught a large class of engineering students. Although many of the students were “traditional” students, many were not. I had not realized the extent of the students’ different experiences, backgrounds, educational expectations, and outside time pressures. These differences caused me to rethink my teaching methods, and to investigate the literature on learning and on understanding students’ life experiences. I now realize that many students do not share my educational values. My teaching needs to stimulate more intellectual curiosity in students and have them realize the life-long importance of education. Most students are goal oriented and want to be successful. I want to focus their energy into a desire for life-long learning and curiosity. One idea is to have students read material that lets them think about the course in a different context or that brings a different perspective to the course material. Although content is important, I hope encouraging students to think more broadly about the course material will allow them to better understand the concepts and, importantly, allow them to extrapolate the learning process to new situations and problems.

I also realize that the classroom is a very limited structure for teaching in terms of time and delivery. This limitation is especially apparent with “non-traditional” students. Such students often spend many hours working to pay their bills or tuition, taking care of sick children, often as single parents, and spending time commuting (especially looking for

parking). By finding methods to deliver curriculum outside the classroom, these students will have a better, more rewarding learning experience. I plan to use learning management systems, such as Blackboard or Moodle, to engage students outside class. To develop critical thinking, I will have students reflect on reading assignments. Blackboard has tools that allow students to write and submit such reflections electronically. This frees the student to work on and submit the assignment according to their schedule. A great experience of college is interacting with peers. Again, “non-traditional” students are at a disadvantage. To increase opportunities for student interaction, I plan to use a wiki for group projects. Wikis provide an excellent resource for collaborative learning from a distance. Students can work on the wiki from a computer at any time, editing content, commenting on other students’ contributions, or researching. Additionally, students develop important interpersonal skills.

Teaching challenges me to develop and create better learning environments. The changing nature of best practices, the constantly expanding availability and uses of technology, and the continued influx of new, diverse students makes teaching an exciting and rewarding career.

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