

Philosophy of teaching – Daniel D. White

As a student, I was most influenced by teachers and professors who demonstrated a passion for their subject, a knack for communicating it effectively, and a desire to engage students. These instructors were ultimately the ones who challenged my thinking, motivated me to succeed, and stoked my interest in anthropology and evolution. The qualities that I most admire in these people are the qualities that I strive to emulate in my own teaching.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to teach a number of different courses, upper level, lower level, large and small at the University at Albany. I have learned valuable lessons from each experience. The following essay documents my teaching objectives, how I endeavor to meet these objectives, how I assess student progress, where I think I need improvement, and why I have chosen teaching as a profession.

Teaching objectives

I begin every semester thinking about where I want my students to be at the end of the course. At a basic level, they need to learn the facts and concepts that underpin each course. They need to be comfortable with the vocabulary, theories, and major questions that propel research. They must also understand that we approach anthropology from four main directions: linguistics, archeology, culture, and biology. From this base, I challenge students to build or reinforce a healthy, reasonable skepticism about these facts and concepts by introducing them to the scientific process. Undergraduate students are often surprised when I say, “How do you know that what I am telling you is ‘true’?” It invokes a cognitive dissonance between the facts of a trusted authority and the possibility that these facts are falsifiable. By the end of the semester, I want my students to be able to find evidence beyond their notes and textbook for the facts and concepts that they have learned and to develop ideas and hypotheses for themselves. Challenging the way students think is an essential goal in each course I teach.

Achieving my objectives

In order to fulfill these objectives, I need to be organized, knowledgeable, approachable, and engaging. As much as undergraduate students enjoy their freedom, they almost always crave structure in their coursework. It is important to me to provide a clear outline of the goals and knowledge that they need to gain to be successful in each

course. I provide a clear syllabus with a calendar of events at the beginning of each semester and I make every effort to follow that plan.

Students learn best from instructors who “know their stuff.” In my previous role as an academic advisor to over 350 students a year, I heard how even our most challenging instructors gain respect by being both knowledgeable and approachable. I strive to be both an expert in my field and a caring mentor to motivate students intellectually and personally.

Although I am available to students outside of class, I try to make the most of the time that we have together in the classroom. One of the simplest ways to motivate students and show them that I am interested in their success is to learn their names. Admittedly, learning the names of students in a 200 seat lecture center course is more daunting than a small upper level class of 25 students, but the effect is even more profound. Students come to class and participate when they know that they are not anonymous.

Engaging students in course material is one of my most important tasks in every class meeting. I am always excited about the material and the chance to talk about anthropology with an interested audience. Discussion is an important component in all of my classes. I often first pose a question and ask students to introduce themselves and talk to their neighbor about the questions. This allows them to think and react without the pressure of the whole class staring at them. It also allows them to develop relationships with each other that often prove to be just as important as class time in their intellectual development. Then, I call on a few students to get the discussion rolling. I ask them to think of examples from their lives and other classes to help elucidate concepts. I believe that the more students discuss, repeat, analyze and digest the material in class, the better chance that they will have to retain that information beyond the end of the semester. I try to encourage and cultivate students’ curiosity by showing them that I am curious too.

Assessing student learning

Students arrive in my classroom with different learning styles and different academic abilities. Some have developed into conscientious mature adults and others need more guidance and patience. In assessing students, I try to examine their knowledge in a number of different ways. I routinely utilize multiple choice, short answer,

identification, and essay questions on tests. In this way, all of my students have a chance to show their abilities. It also provides important feedback for me on the areas that I may not have communicated as effectively as I had hoped.

In most of my courses, I require a research-based paper. I have learned that even students who have good writing skills need guidance and support in the research and writing process. Over the past few semesters, I have adopted a more hands-on approach to the research paper. I break down the writing process and require students to turn in a summary of their topic, an annotated bibliography, a paper outline, and a final product. The goal of this work is to enable students to produce a clear, well-written and well-thought out final product of which they can be proud. I am thrilled to say that this process has produced at least one paper that was contributed to a top ranked peer-reviewed journal (Gallup et al., in press).

A work in progress

Every semester I learn something new about how to better approach students and present course material. I have tried to infuse technology into my teaching but this is an area that still needs work. I would like to better employ online resources such as Blackboard to promote class discussions and interaction. I would also like to find new ways of detecting students who may be struggling with course material earlier in the semester when intervention is most effective. Lastly, I would like to spend more time observing the classrooms of some of the expert teachers on our campus.

Why I teach

I teach for the satisfaction of those light bulb moments. I teach to see the twinkle of understanding that appears in a student's eyes when the Hardy-Weinberg equation becomes more than just an opaque mathematical formula or when she sees why gene flow *reduces* variation between populations. I teach for the smile that comes across that student's face when she leaves the final exam saying, "I aced it," and she does. I teach for those who ask for a reference to learn more about a subject and for those who don't get everything on the first try. I teach because I am passionate about anthropology and I truly enjoy sharing the knowledge that I have gained with students.