

Teaching Philosophy
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Fall 2009

Merriam-Webster's on-line dictionary defines *philosophy* as "An analysis of the grounds of and concepts expressing fundamental beliefs". Want some concepts that express my fundamental beliefs about teaching?

First, every class is a feedback-rich experience. Every time I give a talk, I learn from my students. In the best situations, we build on each other's insights to better understand the topic at hand. Examples and counter-examples fly through the room. Other times the feedback shows that the ideas are not being well conveyed, and that it's time for an alternative approach. Listening is as important as speaking. Even in large lecture halls, student ideas and feedback, whether from questions or real-time iClicker, helps guide the direction of the activity.

Second, students learn best from experience. This means that class exercises and assignments should include some deep analysis and thinking, rather than drill and memorization. I use simulation -- through extended case studies (as in my systems analysis classes) or through experiential activities (used in the systems thinking classes) -- to create constructive stress and pave the way for deeper learning and integration.

Third, vitality is part of the classroom environment. Instructors in business schools convey information and skills; they also must show how each element is relevant to our chosen applied science. Most of my classes involve technical topics, and can be pretty dry. Some students are comfortable with an analytic approach; others need more to see the content's relevance. My students, by and large, have little work experience, and need a directed and grounded learning model. I approach this by illustration, using my own work experience or from external case- or problem-oriented readings that go beyond the textbook. It's up to the instructor to instill a vision of the end product and keep the students engaged along the way.

Fourth, challenge the students. I decided a long time ago that my courses would be based on high standards of performance, based in part on my own experiences with challenging classes. At the same time, the path to achieving good grades needs to be quite clear. My most recent experiment is to provide explicit and detailed grading criteria for the major deliverables at the beginning of the semester, so that students know what I expect them to do. This sets a standard and helps them gauge expectations for all of us.

Fifth, prepare the students. I have been using BlackBoard for years to distribute class lecture notes and readings. Each lecture starts with the distribution of an outline, with emphasis on key topics and copies of focal graphics. I found that providing an annotated outline engages critical thinking and note-taking, improving student retention. A full deck of Power Point slides are ready right after class and assignments are available on-line. Yet each class meeting has its own momentum, and an instructor must always be ready to drop or change sequence depending on what happens in the classroom.

Am I always successful? No. In some ways, this list of beliefs reflects the areas where I

wish to grow as a teacher: Listen better to students. Develop better ways to engage students during class and through assignments. Show the relevance of each element to the final product, and find ways to challenge the students. Be ready for change and adapt in real-time to the needs of the class.

Much of what I do I learned from examples. My best teachers, the ones who affected me the most, were excited about the subject matter. They were accessible and available to help, either during office hours, or after. I still have a list of instructor home telephone numbers, and I give my students permission to call me (as long as they do so before 9:00, so as not to wake my kids).

Years ago I took a course in state and local government from a national political figure. This was his second year in the classroom after failing to win re-election. In the first year, he taught his course from the hip – no preparation, no engagement of students, no interaction. He was hammered on his student evaluations (which were public); his students felt that while he knew his material, he was still giving speeches, and not teaching.

What did he do? Prior to beginning the next year, he decided to change. When he taught again, when I was in the room, he had done his homework. By the second class he knew every student's name, something about them, and had prepared a wonderful, insightful course that brought together fascinating cases and real-world experience. I watched this instructor learn, and I admired his strength in taking feedback and changing in the quest for improvement. Recall that first definition of philosophy, from Merriam-Webster? They provide another: "the pursuit of wisdom". It's a little presumptuous to think that students gain wisdom from my classes, but I know that I gain it from them.