

Philosophy of Teaching Statement

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My first teaching experience was almost my last. In the isolation of impoverished rural North Carolina, I was given a mid-year middle school teaching assignment of 15-year-olds who had failed 8th grade just enough times to be biding their time until their 16th year freed them from their “prison.” Even their families wanted their “release,” so they could be home to help on the farm. Atticus Finch held little fascination to them, no matter how creative my assignments were. My frustration drove me to vow I would never teach again.

Serendipitously, despite that intention, I was later offered an assignment teaching evenings at a local community college. I took it, thinking it might be different. My supposition proved true: I loved it. Two decades later, my university students are riveted, eagerly chiming in as I talk about the antics of my cat Fluffy when illustrating the development of an essay; or as we discuss stages of ethical development in the characters of well-known people, real or fictional; or as they discover the ubiquitous assumption of the presence of the divine in 16th-17th century poetry, as opposed to its marked absence in 20th century literary worldviews.

I've learned many things about teaching since that first year, developing a multi-faceted teaching philosophy, which includes such diverse perspectives as those of Edgar Dale, Benjamin Bloom, and Ernest Boyer. Dale's “Cone of Experience” posits that learners retain only a small percentage of what they only read or hear or see, but an impressive 70% of what they talk over with others (such as class discussion or workshops), 80% of what they experience personally (“doing”) and 90% of what they teach someone. By actively engaging in the material, the student becomes far more interested and involved in the learning process.

At the beginning of each course, I introduce some foundational concepts, and then the students jump in and take over. When students learn by “doing,” they gain far more than if I merely lectured “at” them. It enlivens the material, embeds it in the students' consciousness more fully, and stimulates and challenges them to learn at all Bloom's cognitive levels, especially the highest ones of analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing, and creating – applying these activities to the real world as well as to course content.

I have done this in multiple ways, such as, in composition classes, holding frequent essay workshops for each essay – in pairs, trios, and whole class combinations – since students learn to write better not by listening to general principles about good writing, but by actually “doing” it – writing and editing their own, and their peers' own, compositions. Another way I have engaged the class is, in the absence of a school newspaper, creating a class newspaper of student essays and articles that we distributed for the entire school. In literature classes, students research in groups as well as individually, and then give multi-media presentations and hold discussions of stories and their authors and times; *they* lead the class and I occasionally guide them along the way as needed. In World Religions, students conduct clergy interviews and attend religious services of the religions we are studying, with groups of three (research and my experience show this is the ideal number) choosing a religion, researching it in-depth, and presenting it to the class; and in Ethics, they discuss ethical principles in terms of current and real-life ethical events culled from news articles, magazines, TV, or films.

Personally, I employ Boyer's scholarships of teaching, inquiry, engagement (application or service), and integration. Academic disciplines are not static and isolated; they are dynamic and an integral part of the fabric of the world. Through interaction with colleagues, and through interaction with culture and society as a whole, one stays current and connected. So in addition to striving for excellence in the classroom, a professor's involvement in the activities of researching, writing and presenting or publishing in the academic community maintains her expertise and relevance, which in turn keeps teaching fresh and alive. Considering her discipline and knowledge within the context of the entire world does the same. In the end, a good professor stays interested, enthusiastic, significant, and revitalized in teaching and learning.

Knowledge is not accrued in a vacuum, but within the framework of students' unique personal backgrounds, cultures, abilities, and experiences. In my present position, I regularly teach students ranging in age from 18 to 60, with their varying life situations, as well as students from around the world – including Russia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the islands. As the daughter of an Army officer, I was raised living and traveling in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and I am comfortable and adept at teaching and interacting with students from all cultures and life situations. And, no matter the background of the student, personalities always differ, as do intellectual abilities, so a good teacher makes adjustments for individual student needs as well as whole class needs.

Finally, I think good teachers simply love what they do. That love of the profession, love of the discipline, love of seeing students learn and grow, and enthusiasm and excitement about going to class to teach, makes it all work. It's contagious. See: <http://kareyperkins.com/cv/studentcomments.pdf>.