

THE DOSSIER

Evidence Provided by the Nominee

Teaching Philosophy Statement

Developing from Naïve to Deliberate

Decades ago, as a very young, enthusiastic, and novice junior high school teacher in an inner-city, I was often asked how I was able to “survive.” I would rather irreverently, but somewhat proudly, say that “I drive them crazy faster than they can drive me crazy.” As I think about this now, I can easily see how flippant and insensitive this can appear, and yet I can remember the drive to be proactive and dedicated to making a difference by learning to manage the chaos, and how much I loved the students. I believed that my role in that position was to make sure that I did everything I could so that as much learning as possible could take place in the classroom and beyond. In some ways, my philosophy of teaching in higher education emanates from my earlier career days, though I am happy to say that I (and the articulation of my practice wisdom) have matured and moved from the study of children’s pedagogical principles to adult learning theory and action (hooks, 1994, 2004; Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998).

Holding a Relational Stance

I begin my classes by telling students that *our* goal is for them to “get” the concepts and practices introduced in the courses and that *we* will do whatever it might take for them to understand and integrate new information as fully as possible. They quickly see and hear that I view being in the classroom together as a relational and collaborative practice with mutual and co-constructed influences. Ken Bain (2004), in a similar way, very powerfully talks about understanding what excellent teachers do to achieve success. The key, he claims, is in the teacher’s *attitudes, faith, willingness, commitment* (see p. 78). Mary Rose O’Reilley (1998) talks of teachers creating space for learning to occur. I agree with both and yet need to extend their ideas to include that *both* teachers *and* students (especially in graduate school) have the responsibility to create a space of safety, freedom, and openness for attitudes, faith, willingness, and commitment to bloom. This is part of what I believe and expect adults to enact in higher education learning.

There are two major premises underlying this thinking about accountability to learning: community and process. I have changed my idea from it is *my* job (alone) to do everything possible to achieve student success to seeing this as a joint enterprise in which *we* (all participants in the classroom) must be actively involved in everyone’s success, thus initiating a shared sense of responsibility for individual and group success (i.e., it is hard to see how individuals can be fully successful if the group is not; conversely, individual successes do not necessarily feed the group’s success). The second premise is that *how* we proceed will be every bit as important, and probably even moreso, than the actual content/material that forms the basis for the class. In other words, I believe that the process used in the class will have equal and at times more meaning than the content.

To ratchet this idea one notch, let me add the benefit of isomorphism, that is, having the learning occur at multiple levels simultaneously. If we want students to understand as fully as

possible the key elements of a new profession, teachers need to impart the ideas by living the ideas—I need to do as I say, I need to “walk the talk,” I need to live out the principles I espouse (especially when the going gets tough) so that they will be encouraged to do the same. This article speaks to my aspirations for both my teaching and therapy.

If we are not to be adversaries in the classroom, then what is the appropriate relationship between teachers and students? As I see it, it is that of good neighbors in a small community. The classroom works best when students and teacher perceive it as a place where there is a continuing conversation among interested people, similar to what one might have with neighbors and friends. A sense of community is not created by rules and laws but by a sense of mutual respect and tolerance. Good neighborliness cannot be legislated—it can only be learned by example and experience, and it flourishes in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance of differences. (Singham, 2005, p. 57)

To do less is to confuse and dishonor the students. This does not demand perfection, just regular reflection and adjusting. At a conference once, I learned that successful organizations were those that built in time for employees to reflect, to question, and to comment on what was transpiring and how processes and decisions were experienced. I agree that a healthy environment is one in which participants, students, or members can comment on what they are noticing, understanding, feeling confused by, experiencing, learning, questioning. This in turn becomes a site of change.

Another major part of my philosophy is that class and class progress is *ours*—it is neither mine nor the students’, but is due to our holism—in the systems vernacular the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, class is not a competitive or individual enterprise, but a highly cooperative complex of relationships. Strong and committed relationships provide both the impetus and the safety to operate at the level of the unfamiliar or in educational terms, one’s frustration level or “zone of proximal development” (Chaiklin, 2003). It takes faith, but I believe that is how we get better and proficient at what we do!

The last big idea that I hold in teaching is that of the completeness in the complement of teaching and learning. My teaching only makes sense relative to student learning, growth, and development—they are coupled and tend to support each other. And my teaching is not only about imparting content, but helping students to develop in accordance with what Martha Nussbaum (1997) defines as one of the roles of the university:

If we cannot teach our students everything they will need to know to be good citizens, we may at least teach them what they do not know and how they may inquire. . . . Above all, we can teach them how to argue, rigorously and critically, so that they can call their minds their own. (p. 205)

Reflecting on Complementarities, Symmetries, and Wholeness

So when I think about my part in this endeavor (and privilege), I must think of the whole and refer to our work together as teaching/learning. Teaching is dependent upon learning (though I am not so sure the reverse is true). There have been times when I thought I was brilliant in the classroom and wished that those particular moments had been videotaped for training

purposes. And yet, when I have checked back to see if those moments of brilliance were central to learning (in an effort to corroborate my own conclusions), I have always been sorely disappointed—students have without fail chosen other moments, other examples, other explanations, and other stories. By way of a quick example, I once asked a former student who had been in at least three of my classes several years before, what seemed to stand out for him and his answer was, “The time I was having an extremely bad day and you nodded and smiled at me.” His response reminded me of the uniqueness of each student and how students experience school, their teachers, and the environment of learning.

A related notion that I live by is that each student will come to use and understand the material differentially, at different levels of sophistication, and at different rates. I am never disappointed by this and it becomes motivation for altering our processes. It requires the capacity to be flexible and responsive to students. Jane Tompkins (1996), through heartfelt and arduous self-reflection, tells us about her own journey of change from fear to faith:

faith that things will work out and that if I pay attention to the moment, without too much pressure to make it come out a certain way, I'll be all right. Sometimes this means asking the students what they think and being willing to let go of previously made plans in favor of taking up the opportunities circumstance provides. And it means trusting my own instincts. (p. 227)

I know that teaching is my life's calling because no matter how tired, frustrated, or overwhelmed I am, the minute I cross the threshold into the classroom, my spirits are uplifted and I am energized. One of my favorite compliments from students is when they leave class “complaining” that their heads are spinning. Maybe this is just the graduate school version of driving students crazy. At any rate I would say students get their tuition's worth!

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