

Teaching Philosophy Statement:
A Reflection about Teaching and Learning
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My role as a teacher is to open the door to knowledge and critical thinking as wide as needed for all to enter. While I recognize that self-direction is an important tool for learning that works well for some students, I also recognize that other students may need help and support in obtaining their educational objectives. I believe that I have a fundamental obligation to assist students who need assistance in crossing the threshold, as well as to encourage the self-directed to stay focused. To accomplish this vision and welcome all students through the doorway, I see teaching and learning as having three interwoven stages: exposing students to new concepts, facilitating understanding of the material, and developing well-supported and reasoned arguments that challenge existing thinking. Elements of each stage must be an integral part of the design of every class--from an introductory communications class to an advanced seminar on race and news--in order to support the ultimate goal of developing thoughtful critical thinkers.

The first stage exposes students to certain information and ideas, such as the agenda-setting function of the news or the reoccurring fears that accompany new technology. In the field of communications studies, especially mass communications, this exposure can take many forms. While readings can provide a foundation for understanding the discipline and setting forth theoretical concepts, there are other ways to offer the first exposure to ideas. For example, in an introductory course I have used recordings of Edward R. Murrow broadcasting live from London during the bombings of World War II to talk about the evolution of the radio and the news. For one student hearing Murrow may make the information real and memorable, and for another the written words may be sufficient. Such exposure activities may be done in class, or they may be done prior to class to facilitate deeper reflection and discussion in the actual class-time. I use different teaching strategies to ensure that the material is accessible for a variety of learning styles.

The second stage is closely related to the first: to facilitate student learning of the material. I must not only expose the students to information but also facilitate understanding of what the material means. Again, because students learn differently, I believe that each key idea must be addressed with several different strategies. Readings can be reinforced through screenings of a film or television clip. The screening can be analyzed through written reflection that asks about reactions to what has been seen and how it relates to a reading. Lectures can introduce new concepts and reinforce ideas. Writing can take the form of in-class exercises or at-home work. The writing may provide the basis for small group discussions or large group discussions, or conversely, group discussion may serve as a brainstorming precursor to writing. I incorporate a thoughtful variety of these activities into the syllabus and class plans in order to reach the greatest number of students. Using a variety of techniques and methods also serves to peak student interest and thus motivate interest in the material.

The third stage is the culmination that will inspire students to think beyond the confines of existing knowledge and become thoughtful, insightful critical thinkers. I want the

students to challenge what they see and hear with solid arguments supported by evidence that they have evaluated and judged to be sound. This ability requires that they are willing to consider a broad range of perspectives and sources of knowledge. For example, an assignment might require analysis of advertising campaigns to understand the connection between U.S. media, corporate interests, and commercial culture. I might begin our class by distributing some magazine advertisements and asking students to work in small groups and answer the questions: who is the target audience? How do you know who the audience is? What is the message being conveyed? They would then share their ideas with the larger group, and I would facilitate their conversation analyzing the ad. This preparatory work could lead to a written assignment where they find ads and critique them individually. The key is to construct the sequence of activities so as to further the learning goals for the particular course.

These three stages represent a process for teaching and learning and must be incorporated into classes at every level, from introductory to advanced courses. Similarly, ongoing assessment and feedback is critical to knowing how well the students are actually learning. To assess student knowledge, I utilize a variety of tools, recognizing that students may succeed in demonstrating knowledge differently. Multiple choice and short answer tests, as well as oral presentations, have their place in assessing a baseline of concrete information. Written papers and essay questions allow students to demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge and think critically. For example, the discussion above about analyzing a magazine ad can be seen as aligning a learning objective (to analyze contemporary advertising) with two teaching activities (small group work and larger group discussion) with an assessment (the individual paper). The actual choice and combination of assessment tools must align with the learning objectives for the course and the teaching strategies.

As I assess students, I also seek their input and assessment during the term through an anonymously written mid-term evaluation form. I ask what they think is working well in the class and areas that need improvement. I then share the aggregated feedback at our next meeting. More than once I have found that what concerned my students was something that I had also been questioning, and I then made changes to address our mutual concerns. For example, in one class that did not do well on a mid-term exam and expressed their frustration, I offered to reorganize our time to include a ten-minute review session that they would run. I divided the class into groups, and they took responsibility for preparing the reviews. This change not only empowered the students but also provided them with ownership over their learning. It also fostered a greater sense of community by having to work together and gave space for imagination in creating the reviews.

Being open to change and using a variety of assessment tools and teaching methods underscores how I see my role as a teacher: to open the door to as many different types of learners as possible. I believe that the outcome will be students who have broadened their knowledge base in communications and progressed in the goal of becoming critical thinkers.