

Teaching Philosophy

The hardest part of having a teaching philosophy is that it will change. It might happen during the first five minutes after handing it in, or three months later, but regardless of the time, a teacher's experience in the classroom will change both how they handle their classrooms and how they view their students. This is scary! But at the same time, it is also incredibly exciting. Why? Well as a teacher, how do I know that what is considered the normative, accepted ideal for today will not degenerate into the next socially destructive taboo? Short answer: I don't know, and if I might be so bold, none of us do which is exactly what makes teaching great. It's the dynamism and interactive qualities of students that keep us excited. It's their spontaneous and irrational behavior that makes us necessary and it's their need for understanding that makes our role so important. We become teachers because we love the variety and insight that's attached to the process. This isn't an assembly line job. We DON'T produce identical, indistinguishable clones because we realize that once they leave our care, if they aren't driven, independent and pro-active adults with developed skills and ideas, then not only have we failed, but we've produced a *redundant* member of society. It's not a mechanical practice. It's about reflection, dynamic behavior and constant adaptation on your part and I believe that it's our responsibility, as teachers, to provide an environment that's not only conducive to academia, but to social justice, growth and harmony as well. So, in contemporary multicultural education, Social Justice is an absolute necessity, I must raise the question: How do we as teachers implement it in our classrooms?

On the surface it seems simple. Maybe even *easy*. Be open! Be accepting! Free your class! Inspiring rhetoric, but I think that the initial aura of simplicity is misleading, so to truly decipher how to implement these ideas, first we have to reflect, or more concisely: determine our motivations. So what motivates us to learn? Education can be empowering, personally enriching and most of all, liberating. Through education we can emancipate ourselves from our imposed hegemonic bindings. We can enrich our abilities to think independently, and finally, we can take ownership of our fates, our lives and make our world a better place to be through our thoughts and actions. Education puts us in the driver's seat and in the desirable position to contribute to what we deem important! I would hope that my students attend my class because they feel the same way. They want to express themselves! They want to achieve something significant! But most of all they want independence! And I believe that it's our job as teachers to give them that. So practically, how do we adapt this idea to the classroom environment, (as theory is often times, MUCH different from practice)? Well I think that to rework any theory or idea so that it's practical to the situation of the classroom we have to first understand the opportunities and constraints under which we, (Educators and students), learn. I believe that learning is fostered most effectively in an environment where openness to all ideas is not just a passing impulse, but a necessity. Ideally, I would like to trust that all students feel compelled to answer questions, are interested in class discussions and feel safe enough to have their ideas and agendas heard. However, the complexity of the peer situations beyond my class is something that I cannot even hope to regulate or control. So what can I do?

As teachers, the only environment we can guarantee safety and freedom of expression in is within the comfortable walls of our classrooms. So how do I make my personal classroom a utopia of safety and expressive freedom? First and foremost, respect. Respect for fellow students, respect for teachers and respect for the rules of the classroom. It is the key to making sure that everyone in my class has both the opportunity and ability to interact with the ideas being promoted in the way that they feel is most conducive and comfortable to their style of learning. Second, learning is not assimilation. I consider learning styles to be as different as fingerprints, so for me to say what “is” or “isn’t” conducive to someone’s learning style would be both short sighted and ignorant. Consequently, this means that my lessons can’t be presented with only one learning style in mind and instead they must try to cover as many bases as possible while remaining accurate, interesting and engaging. Truly, while this is the hardest part of being a teacher in the contemporary system, it can also be the most rewarding because I believe there is nothing more gratifying than helping another human being enrich their lives. However, although we are giving students choices that they had no access to before and helping them to reach their goals, we must retain a cautious neutrality because unless pursued with careful diligence, these goals can quickly and easily morph into an ugly indoctrination. Simply put, if you are aware of the educational pitfalls of your predecessors, peers and yourself, you need never subject your own students to them.

Reflecting and assessing your own mistakes and biases is the first step to conquering them, and although this is a highly idealized statement, as a teacher with expectations such as these what do I expect the learning outcomes of my students to be? I’ve always felt that the most positive aspect of my own continuing education, (and possible factor in), was my sustained excitement about personal expression and expansion of my worldly and practical vocabulary. I love participating in education because every time I am fortunate enough to learn something, my whole outlook on the world changes. Things that previously seemed to be unimportant or uninteresting now hold a new luster, and even better, previously “important” or “interesting” aspects of life could be re-examined for new and exciting insights. I would love to see this passion in my students because not only does it mean I can learn from them, but also that they are *as* excited by the world around them as I am. Admittedly this is indirectly referring to my interest in getting away from the roles of “educator” and “student”, (Which I believe is a more “I give and you take” relationship), and moving towards a “mentor” and “mentat” philosophy, (which I think is closer to a free exchange of ideas without the cumbersome stigma of educational hierarchy). I consider this shift to be extremely important because we NEED our students. Why? Well in order to build successful programs, they must be both relevant and interesting, and there’s no better source of contemporary relevance than what we can glean from our students, (who will be happier to contribute if they feel safe in expressing themselves). In the end I guess I hope to be someone who can be relied upon to give them knowledge they need without bias, while simultaneously appropriating and utilizing theirs in my lessons. Sometimes however, hidden curriculum can creep into even the best laid plans

As a teacher, you tend to reflect a lot. Questions like: What is my hidden curriculum? How many unconscious references to my personal biases/agendas am I going to make today? Etc. should be cycling through your mind every time you try to promote an idea, but how can we answer these questions properly if we aren't aware of the proper process? Ethical positions, personal values and themes. These are the three components that will usually comprise a teacher's hidden curriculum and as professionals, identifying these issues should be a top priority simply because of their ability to simultaneously compromise our goals as educators and our professional integrity. However, ethics, values and the personal themes that are purveyed by these issues are all interconnected, so dealing with one, means dealing with all of them. Let's start with ethics. My personal ethics revolve around an empathic understanding of differences to promote personal and public safety. At this point in my life I don't believe that fundamentalism is ever necessary. Now because of my faith in the resolution of conflict through discussion and debate, plus my disbelief in fundamentalism, none of my ethical or moral values are hard set. In fact, I am rather proud of my ability to look at a subject from both points of view, but as an educator who passionately believes in the importance of independent thought, the last thing I want to do is indoctrinate. However, it's not always this easy. Somebody cue the dynamic environment of teaching! The reason this is such a difficult profession is because it will offer up situations that put your morals in conflict with your ethics with a sprinkling of thematic clash. It's the ability of a classroom to navigate without oppression or conflict and the promotion of development in these ideas that makes a great environment for learning and it's been consistently shown that this requires a group effort. In the end, it's my belief that if we can all work together, (Ethics), have fun, (thematic element), and retain the idea that everyone's opinion has both value and importance, (personal code of values), those will be the determining factor in whether or not a class turns out great.

When it comes to teaching, routine is a killer. But my problem is that I like bacon and eggs as much as the next guy. It's quick, it's easy and most of all it's absolutely delicious. However, while so much as a hint of bacon smell is enough get me charging out of bed like an enraged bull just fed a triple espresso, I'd like to think that I'm smart enough to not eat it every day. Bottom line, just because something works and feels great one day, doesn't mean it's going to have the same affect, or be equally appealing the next. The same analogy is true of teaching, as I believe that the elements of variety, spontaneity and ambitious planning can be just as important as our archetypal staples of content, structure and knowledge. The really difficult part comes when you try to promote a lesson plan that is "foreign" or "different" from what students are used to because not only is everyone's "bacon and eggs" going to be completely individual, but it's also going to be constantly dynamic and change day to day. Building their ability to adapt is integral in your ability to learn from them and for this to happen we need to have Social Justice within our classrooms. Why do I believe this? I believe this because I want a class where artistic and intellectual freedom is as natural as breathing and eating. I want my students to be so comfortable with social diversity that we can remove the hierarchy from the teaching process. Most of all, I want my students to be able to achieve and I truly believe that they can do this by promoting an environment where they can experience more freedom than I ever had.