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Teaching Philosophy Statement

Fake News. Free Speech. Social Justice. These buzzwords infiltrate our news feeds and personal and professional conversations, and they present real issues that affect societies across the globe. As cultivators of active and increasingly political minds, educators in today's institutions of higher learning are well aware of this current reality and are presented with the challenge of preparing our students to be able to recognize and distinguish factual information from dis-/misinformation; engage in constructive civil discourse; and take concrete steps of action to meaningfully impact the society around them. My teaching philosophy is reflective of my commitment to meet this challenge and I hope to achieve this with the following strategies: (1) design and deliver measurable learning outcomes that communicate important competencies students should expect to gain at the end of the course (2) develop course assignments and assessment methods that connect theory to the real world and build research, writing, and comprehension skills (3) create a respectful and engaging learning environment where all students are equal and effective participants, regardless of their academic or personal backgrounds.

Designing Measurable Learning Outcomes

For introductory courses, which I teach, conventional wisdom dictates that teachers provide an overview of the subject matter at hand, privileging basic over deep understanding. This emphasis on *foundational knowledge*, while expedient, does have the propensity to exclude opportunities for students to develop and apply skills (*Application*), learn to theorize and make connections between ideas (*Integration*), discover and communicate the personal and political implications of what they have learned (*Human Dimension of Learning*), connect with the subject matter to the extent that they want to learn more about it (*Care*), and become effective, self-directed learners (*Learning to Learn*). When instructors fail to meet these dimensions, according to Fink (2003), significant learning does not occur. As I have grown in instructional practice, I have found it useful to model my courses to engage with Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning. For instance, I have assessed that upon completion of my course, *Politics of Development: A Focus on Africa*, students should be able to

- Understand the nature and importance of political institutions (how they are created, maintained, challenged, and transformed) in development *(Foundational Knowledge and Integration)*
- Situate current African events in historical context *(Integration)*
- Critically assess preconceived mainstream ideas about Africa and clearly and persuasively communicate alternative viewpoints with credible supporting evidence *(Application, Human Dimension, Learning How to Learn)*
- Offer/evaluate existing solutions to contemporary development challenges facing the African region *(Application, Human Dimension, and Caring)*

Communicating these competencies in my learning outcomes not only informs students that they will have the opportunity to develop skills that would carry them throughout their undergraduate career and beyond, it also gets them excited about the prospect of learning *something different* and in *a different way*, especially when compared to their experiences in other introductory courses.

Creating Authentic Course Assignments/Assessments

According to Bain and Zimmerman (2009), students who are more likely to 'learn deeply' are those who are "greatly influenced by the words, actions, and assessment choices made by the teacher" (p. 11). To facilitate this deep learning, I have learned to design my class assignments and assessments to privilege declarative and functional knowledge. Students are encouraged to demonstrate a good understanding of the course content, be able to develop and express their viewpoints on issues clearly and support these viewpoints with credible evidence. Students are also expected to be able to apply knowledge acquired to real world problems and evaluate existing solutions and/or provide novel ones. To this end, my courses almost always feature a mix of presentations, research essays, and exams as they allow students apply the necessary skills and meet learning outcomes.

While I establish very high standards and expectations, especially for course assignments, I make sure to thoroughly prepare my students and give them tools to make studying, researching, and writing easier. I provide them with detailed written instructions, including grading criteria, discuss these instructions in class, provide feedback on drafts, and invite them to contact me should they have any questions or concerns. Students are also provided with prep materials for exams, from which questions were derived. I do not expect rote memorization in exam responses, but an understanding of the course material and an ability to communicate it effectively.

Fostering an Active and Sensitive Learning Environment

Research has shown that active, informative, and perceptive delivery of learning content is an important quality for good and effective teachers (Michael, 2016). In my experience, adopting these characteristics not only affords me 'adaptive expertise', which allows me to make judgements about that is likely to work in a given context in response to students' needs, it also enables me encourage independent and creative thinking by employing strategies/activities that engage learners.

First, I like to use a variety of media, including digital resources and instructional technologies. For instance, I regularly incorporate carefully chosen documentaries to provide detailed insight and/or alternative viewpoints on a given issue. The goal is to elicit and facilitate student discussion and enable them draw connections between their events in the real world and abstractions featured in the course material. Students also have access to course materials via an online course management system and an online resource guide for research writing and access to curated news sites.

Second, I prefer a teaching style that privileges collaborative learning. My students spend a fair amount of time in smaller groups in which they can freely express themselves to each other while critically engaging with the course material. This, I believe, enables them to generate ideas, develop insight, and gain confidence in handling new concepts. Students are also made aware that opinions on political issues are often on a spectrum, but constructive but respectful dialogue is indispensable to progress on any given issue. I also facilitate active learning by encouraging class simulations, short reflective writings, and other alternatives to traditional teaching.

Third, I acknowledge that my students are from diverse backgrounds and try as much as possible to make the learning condition conducive to all. Students are encouraged to approach me with any learning difficulties or issues regarding access to course resources. In addition, I consider it

important to be sensitive to issues such as sexism, ethnocentrism, and religious bias. In this regard, I endeavour to create a non-threatening classroom environment, and to do so without compromising the integrity of the subject-matter or stifling open discussion of the issues. I endeavor to build trust at the onset of a course by reiterating the University/Department code of conduct policies and encourage students to come to a consensus on classroom guidelines.

In conclusion, Ambrose et al (2010) posits that "learning is a process that leads to change, which occurs as a result of experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning" (p. 3). While this is what I expect for my students, I also consider this statement to be a personal lesson – in order to become a better teacher, I must be willing to learn from experience. I am always open to feedback from my students and give them multiple avenues to do so (whether through regular instructor-student contact or through formal and informal evaluations). Incorporating this feedback into future practice not only improves students' learning, it also shows that I *care* about bettering my practice. Additionally, I take advantage of resources available to me to improve my skills, whether that involves enrolling in instructional teaching workshops, seeking the advice and assistance of teaching colleagues, or consulting scholarly literature on best teaching practices. In the end, I am committed to enhancing students' undergraduate experience by enriching their lives with appropriate and sustainable knowledge and inspiring them to engage meaningfully with the world around them.

References

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