Exemplary Teaching Practices and Philosophies

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I teach because it is who I am. I can no more stop being a teacher than I can stop breathing. However, I deeply, truly believe that unless learning is happening I might as well stop breathing; teaching is not about me, it is about learning. The classroom is not my “stage” to prove how smart, or how entertaining, I am – it is a place where to have learning occur in a slightly more formalized way than it occurs other places. From the very outset in my classes I seek to impress this on the students and invite them to participate in the learning adventure with me. In my soil biology class we spend half of the first class discussing learning and participation. I share with them my favorite quote: “Someone has not taught unless someone has learned”. I invite them to participate fully in the class and promise that they have my full commitment to their learning. We discuss what it means to participate in a class: they can be engaged partners in learning, or they can sit in the back and just show up. Like perhaps they do in their lives? I ask them what sort of life they want, and challenge them to do more than the bare minimum. This is “whole-person, whole-life” learning to me; as we do in the classroom, so we do in our lives. This is as true for me as it is for my students. I am no better a human simply because I am older, or have a higher degree.

And they respond. I see them sit up, engage and really put themselves into the learning. That is their side of the bargain. My side is to ensure that the work we do together, the material we explore, is relevant and important, and that it contributes to learning. My part of the bargain includes being timely, organized, responsive and respectful. Their part of the bargain is to be curious, open, and responsible. They work to relate their classroom experience to their lives.

From a student in my environmental studies class: “Looking back on this class I find that it has been one of the most meaningful classes that I have taken in my first year in college. Most classes that students take in college focus more on specific events, such as history, or specific formulas or rules, such as any science or math class. In these classes students learn information that is only useful to that class and unless they are going into that field of study they will most likely forget most of what they have learned after the semester is over. This is mostly because the material is not applicable to normal everyday life. However for this class it is applicable to everyday life, and not only is it applicable but it is also important in regards to all the environmental classes that seem to be going on all over the world. Almost everything that I have learned in this class I will remember for the rest of my life.”

I believe there is no magic formula for good teaching. It requires passion for and commitment to learning, as well as enthusiasm for students and an open, creative mind. It requires being willing to do whatever it takes to have learning happen. If something is not working, then change it! I am not dogmatically attached to any particular pedagogy or epistemology. I use what works. Of course, the challenge is to figure out what works. Some days I spend a class session letting them ask me any question they want and we weave it into the larger narrative and goals for the class. On other days I spend more time providing information using “lecture”. I constantly assess how things are going – by watching them, their body language, and by hearing their answers to my questions. For example, I ask them at the start of every class to tell me what happened in the class before. (Note: I don’t tell them, I instead ask them to tell me). Depending on what I hear
from them I modify class as necessary. I am willing to (and have in the past) scrap the entire day’s plan because the students clearly missed what was important from the session before. Creating enduring understanding, reinforcing learning, and demonstrating that I don’t include material that isn’t critical is far more important to me than rushing to “cover the content” regardless of whether or not the students have learned it. This also includes being willing to modify content to keep it current and relevant. I do this by incorporating my research into my teaching, and involving guests. The fresh perspective enlivens class and gives the students and me something to discuss. A key point here is that if I want to know how class is going – I ask the students. They are remarkably articulate about what does or doesn’t work for them and they are enthusiastically willing to be invited as partners in their own learning. An example is from my environmental studies class – after the first and second year of teaching it with up to 250 students in large lecture halls I had heard enough from students about how they felt faceless and a lack of connection in the class. I decided to transform the course by using groups and active learning for half the class. The other half would feature guests representing a range of people and topics in environmental areas. The result was astounding. Not only did the students love the new format, but 36 of them also volunteered to come back as peer-facilitators for the groups the next year. So we innovated again, incorporating peer teachers to work with the groups. It is a wonderful example of structured chaos – the noise of 33 peer teams working simultaneously on cases and open discussions in a single classroom.

Another critical part of my personal philosophy is to be open to different types of learning. I don’t simply mean that people have different learning style preferences – which of course they do – but that learning might show up differently in one student versus another and it isn’t my place to judge how learning should manifest. In soil biology I use a range methods for assessment and a range of assignment types. Some students simply don’t do well with typical short answer classroom exams. Yet when given an open-ended take home exam that allows creativity many of those same students excel. Again, when I am in partnership with the students in service to their own learning then my ideas about “right” or “wrong” ways to test students don’t really matter. What matters is that the student learns. If they are uncomfortable, feel discriminated against, or put into a “one-down” position then their ability to learn is compromised. That is not OK with me. Part of my responsibility is to provide them the opportunity and the benefit of the doubt to demonstrate to me what they have learned.

Third, I work to make learning fun. If I cannot connect with my reasons for teaching something, and if I cannot be passionate about it, and have fun with it then I will not include it. I use a range of techniques to let the students have some fun with their learning. Students in soil biology are asked to work on a project alone or in teams to teach a concept from class to a non-academic audience. The results are truly amazing. An English and Biology major wrote an epic poem about deep-sea vents. I had a student write and illustrate a children’s book about earthworms. One student created a puppet show and posted it on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pdihvoxy2Q). Others set slide shows about prairies to music, or designed board games. In another activity the students worked together in teams and had “breakout” sessions to prepare posters for each other to comment on. Some students got very creative in their drawing and presentation. I asked them to reflect on the process, and offered to them how this is a “real world” activity, one that I routinely participate in when I go to workshops or meetings. It made an impression on them, that they were being asked to learn from
one another and that this is also what happens in the “real world”. Again, a student in environmental studies articulates the value of working in groups: “*This course, Forum on the Environment, has provided a very comfortable atmosphere that promoted an interactive discussion among students including myself. Sharing thoughts about environmental issues with my group members and classmates during the discussions was helpful in broadening my views and knowledge of environment.*”

Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, I believe that teaching is about creating relationships that lead to learning, and is about doing whatever it takes to have learning happen. This means letting go of a need to ‘control’ the classroom, risking being wrong, and being willing to grow and learn – even as I ask my students to risk, and stretch, and grow. In the end, what I hope is to have students realize that learning is a whole-life activity – not simply confined to the classroom or college-years. I hope that any student I share time with learns to engage the world around them with reflective and considered curiosity. I hope that they learn both to look inward to find what makes them feel alive, and also to look outward and question what they see, seeking to understand the patterns and relationships around them.