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Teaching Philosophy

0. Introduction

My teaching philosophy is based on a series of values, each representing my active, ongoing engagement with the teaching enterprise. While learners are naturally the focus of these values, my philosophy also embodies consideration for the information professions and my personal development as an instructor. Since I regard learning itself as process and not product, each value is articulated as a continuous commitment to my teaching aspirations.

1. Valuing the learner as an individual

This process is foundational to establishing a constructive classroom climate. I approach each individual learner with regard for her/his background and motivations, and I want to understand how I can best help her/him achieve future goals. I dedicate time early in the semester to getting to know each learner in my class. I want to understand the unique talents students bring with them. I also want to foster students engaging with one another, so we spend time sharing our personal and professional histories. I use this information throughout the semester to bring relevant examples into our class discussions, as well as justify why we cover particular topics. Focusing on interpersonal communication with each individual learner takes both time and effort, but pays off in establishing a stronger classroom rapport.

2. Valuing the learning process

I respect each individual learner's current skills and understanding while challenging them to perform at their highest potential. This demands flexibility and sensitivity to the realities of the learning process: even the most highly motivated learners will have moments when they struggle with a topic, or when they reach a "saturation point" for the day. I recognize that this type of student anxiety is a normal part of the learning process; at the same time, it's critical not to overemphasize such anxieties. I take guidance from the instructional model of Keller (1983) and recognize that all learners need to feel confident and successful to stay motivated. This obliges me to be sensitive to each student's level of engagement, and to offer alternative ways for students to remain active participants in their own learning and discovery. In the past I've worked with experienced students who sometimes required alternative, more advanced assignments. I've also worked with students who requested additional means to ensure they grasped concepts to their own satisfaction. I believe these types of individual collaborations are vital, because each person's learning process is unique.

3. Valuing the curricular goals

I believe that graduate programs in library and information science should embolden individual learners by nourishing in them a commitment to professional excellence. While this happens beyond the confines of any single discrete course, I strive to teach in a way that underscores the curriculum's broader learning goals. I do this with an emphasis on fostering future leaders who are skilled communicators and critical thinkers. Once students begin to grasp and understand the subject matter, I encourage them to reflect on what they're learning and on what remains unclear. (Communicating this in a short paper or journal entry is often effective.) During class I pose questions about how the subject matter relates to different aspects of LIS; at other times, I ask students to prepare and ask critical questions of each other. Empowering learners to direct the classroom dialogue in this way allows them to demonstrate their engagement with the material, but more importantly prepares them to lead and foster critical discussions in settings outside the classroom.

4. Valuing the teaching process

I consider teaching to be effective when it allows people to comprehend even the most difficult subjects. (In contrast, poor teaching can make almost any topic seem arduous.) For me, teaching quality is rooted in a dedication to two principles: preparation time and student feedback. I prepare lecture notes and class-discussion questions to shape each session, and I prepare in-class activities to reinforce student learning. Before a course even begins I concern myself with the various ways the material might be covered, and also reflect on courses I've taught in the past; these ingredients inform my design, or revision, of the syllabus. In the graduate foundations courses I've taught online, I had students work individually on cumulative semester-long projects, but also had them work together on small-group projects. I design both types of projects to ensure students are getting multiple forms of feedback throughout the semester. Group work offers a mechanism for students to give and receive peer feedback and develop their interpersonal skills. Semester-long projects are planned with various milestones, each one providing me an opportunity to communicate with students individually and offer them feedback and encouragement. My framework for regular feedback helps maintain the supportive learning environment I want to foster.

5. Valuing the learning outcomes

I articulate learning outcomes in my syllabi. Clearly presenting the learning outcomes for the course allows me to be explicit about my intentions as well as my expectations. I extend this transparency to individual assignments. I believe students can approach their work more confidently when learning outcomes have been stated in advance. This approach has been helpful to me, particularly in teaching courses on information organization: students can become preoccupied with memorizing some list of technical minutiae, and steering them back to the specific learning outcomes helps me offer them a sense of perspective. Having clear learning outcomes also provides a basis for assessment. Being transparent to students about how they will be evaluated is fundamental to creating a classroom environment that is conducive to learning.

6. Valuing the information professions

Graduate programs in library and information science are embedded in a professional milieu. I teach LIS theory and concepts, yet I endeavor to relate these to praxis. I want students to learn that scholarship can be put into action, and I frequently provide examples to illustrate this point. I recognize that information professionals operate in a vast range of environments, and my role is to equip them with the principles and ideas that will transcend any particular setting. At the same time, a student may be developing a specific professional identify (e.g., librarian, archivist, school media specialist), which provides an opportunity for my teaching to extend beyond the classroom: serving more as a mentor. My experience with mentoring students has included discussing their concerns around job hunting, and how they might apply classroom learning to their current work environment. I see mentoring as one more strategy for helping current students become successful alumni.

7. Valuing the inclusive learning environment

I pride myself on fostering a learning community where human diversity is respected, and where systematic cultural bias is renounced. Some of my earliest teaching experiences centered on the topics of social justice, inclusion, and personal responsibility – and I carry those sensitivities into my classes today. I find that many students support broad notions of multiculturalism and equality, yet I still encounter attitudes and statements that belie a true engagement with our global realities. I treat these moments as learning opportunities, and I challenge people to question their assumptions as well as recognize their privileges.

8. Valuing my own growth as a teacher

I strive to improve my teaching, and this begins with student evaluations. While formal end-of-course evaluations collect important information, I also conduct informal evaluations throughout the semester. I ask individual students whether or not they enjoy the class, what they would change, and what they appreciate. These conversations not only allow me to get feedback on my teaching, but also help me to develop better relationships with students. Once the topic of my teaching has been broached, and students realize that I sincerely value their input, the classroom comfort zone expands. I reflect on the feedback I'm given and attempt to make honest improvement. In addition to student opinion, I also turn to my colleagues. I appreciate having a collaborative relationship with other faculty: sharing evaluation strategies, imaginative assignments, or other successful teaching techniques.