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Teaching Philosophy

Experiential education actively engages students through first hand personal discoveries and experiments instead of hearing or reading about the experiences of others. As a teaching philosophy it has a long and mostly underutilized history in American higher education. My paramount learning experiences have all involved hands on activities and when reflecting upon my own teaching philosophy, experiential education is undoubtedly at the forefront. When deciding on a major in college I wanted to do something that was tangible to me, something I could feel, touch, smell or hold, and Biology was a natural fit. Once I decided to pursue a graduate degree it enabled me to reflect on what my favorite courses were in the biological sciences and why particular instructors stood out to me. Entomology easily came to mind as a favorite discipline because as students we were frequently engaged in and out of the classroom. After my first entomology class I realized that insects are everywhere. From forests, homes, and gardens to a multitude of aquatic environments I was mesmerized at their ubiquitous distribution and found myself from that point forward constantly observing and collecting insects.

Effective teaching involves enthusiastic instructors knowledgeable in a variety of subjects who utilize innovative methods of teaching and share a common interest in education and the learning experience of their students. In the utopian university, students would be anxious to learn and teachers eager to teach. Instructors would always be prepared for their courses and students would be prepared to learn. However, this is not always the case in modern classrooms of large research institutions. Faculty members are often primarily focused on their research and teaching is only peripheral to their departmental roles. Professors in higher education, particularly in the sciences, often enter a classroom as experts in their research field but not sufficiently prepared for undergraduate and graduate instruction.

Students are all unique, and the teaching techniques utilized must be just as varied to accommodate differences in learning styles so that students are empowered to reach their own maximum potential. Regardless of the methods employed with a class or an individual, knowledge is something facilitated by a teacher but ultimately motivated internally and generated from within each individual student. However, knowledge without a real-world context is easily forgotten. For this reason, increased emphasis on new methods of teaching, such as service-learning, which engages students while creating an environment where knowledge is generated rather than transferred, thereby bridging theory and practice by emphasizing student investment in their own education and intellectual propriety for the knowledge gained. Of course, a person need not be a student in the traditional sense involving classroom instruction to be considered a student. In many ways, anyone actively engaged in learning and motivated by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge can be considered a student, whether they are elementary, high school, or college students, teachers, college professors, academic administrators or interested community members.

My teaching philosophy has been guided by effective teaching and leadership and is largely due to the support, encouragement, and instruction I have received from family, friends, instructors, and peers, all of whom displayed the similar qualities of patience, mutual respect, eagerness to learn, active engagement, willingness to try, and recovery from failure. In a traditional classroom setting, these values may often times be lost to future generations if not made a part of their educational experience, thereby losing an important opportunity for creating and empowering our leaders and educators of tomorrow. As educators, we should not only instill a desire to learn in our students but also to highlight the importance of our students being socially conscious throughout their lives.

“The caterpillar that refuses the cocoon will never learn to fly. The tadpole that refuses legs never learns to hop. There comes a time in every educator's career where a chance must be taken, a fear overcome, and a risk accepted. That is the agony and the glory of learning. The educational environments of the 21st century are being invented by heroic teachers, administrators, and community leaders who have accepted the challenge of the Information Age and are leading the institution of education into the future”—S. Stanley.

Although still in the process of completing my own degree program, I feel like I have already made significant progress in improving my teaching and making the educational experience a more rewarding one for my students. My personal philosophy about teaching is shaped as much by personal experiences as by current educational, scientific literature, and research. As such, my ideas about teaching will continue to evolve through my interactions with faculty, staff, students and the community, and through constant self-evaluation of my teaching, I will continue to strive to be a better educator. It is increasingly important for teachers to serve as examples to their students, sources of advice and guidance when needed, and as an inspiration. It takes a special individual to teach, to be an instructor, and ultimately to inspire. Exceptional teachers often have great interpersonal communication skills and an innate ability to combine “hard” facts learned in a traditional classroom manner with real-world experience. Effective teaching in the future is going to require that teachers be both research experts in their respective fields as well as trained formally or informally to provide quality classroom instruction.