

Teaching Philosophy – Charles A. Brown

A formal definition of teaching is: (1) to impart knowledge, (2) to give instruction, (3) to give lessons, or (4) to cause or help to learn. These definitions are supplemented further by what it means to teach, to instruct and to educate. To teach is a guided process of assigned classroom work and directed study. To instruct is the imparting of highly specialized knowledge in a rather detailed or elaborate manner. To educate implies a course of formal study that results in a comprehensive understanding of a subject. A comprehensive understanding means that learning is taking place. Therefore, learning is the acquisition of knowledge as a result of study, experience and instruction. This definitional discussion is important because it helps to clarify what teaching is. Thus, a teaching philosophy is really a philosophy of education, or how to engage people in a formal course of study that results in a comprehensive understanding of a subject – learning.

Motivating learning is the most important aspect of teaching. We cannot force people to learn but we can facilitate the learning process by our actions. These actions are reflected in how we present material, how we present ourselves, and what we expect from individuals and what they should expect from instructors. The key is to use these actions to motivate people into wanting to learn. I believe that if individuals are motivated to learn, they can learn almost anything. Therefore, the common goal is to educate; to provide a formal course of study, which results in a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The question is, how do we do this?

Since joining the faculty at Penn State Behrend in 2001, I have had the opportunity to teach both undergraduate courses from freshman/sophomores, to juniors and seniors. In addition, I've taught graduate-level courses live and in hybrid form. What I've learned over the years is that motivating learning at each educational level is different. This requires the instructor to adapt appropriately, so learning takes place based on the previous knowledge known at each level. However, the common goal for all is to learn.

To motivate learning, it is important that each of us abide by several attributes or qualities. These attributes are timeliness, preparedness, attentiveness, and best effort. I expect my students to abide by these four attributes, which I document specifically in my syllabi. In addition, students should expect me to abide by them as well. I strive daily to ensure my actions are in congruence with these attributes and I briefly discuss these below.

Students should expect me to be timely to class and to provide timely feedback on assignments. Thus, to motivate them, it is critical that I provide, next-class-period feedback on assignments, exams and quizzes and one-week feedback on larger projects. Timeliness also includes continuous updating of our course management system for weekly postings and grades. Students should expect me to be prepared and knowledgeable about the subject matter. This attribute includes, but is not limited to, a comprehensive knowledge of the course subject matter, the ability to relate this knowledge to real-world problems and issues, and the ability to answer questions. I strive to be engaging and to encourage students to embrace the subject with excitement for learning.

Students should expect me to be attentive to their needs, be considerate, and be respectful. Attentiveness includes the willingness to be flexible, but to be fair, firm, consistent, and available. It is critical to be available during office hours and that I give each student his or her full attention. This shows my willingness to help and reveals that I'm genuine and that I truly care. I think it's important to have fun and have a positive attitude and shows that I truly enjoy my job. Finally, I strive to have a positive learning atmosphere each day and to give my best effort. I try to keep an upbeat classroom, project a positive and professional attitude, get students involved in discussion, stay on track and move forward. I poke fun at myself when I make mistakes to remind students that I am human. I attempt to provide a challenging atmosphere where students can learn and comprehend difficult concepts, while at the same time provide an open, honest, and enjoyable classroom experience.

In addition to classroom teaching, it is important to share knowledge with peers. I continue to be a faculty peer reviewer and a mentor to new faculty, so I can share my philosophies and techniques to make our faculty better. As associate director of the Black School of Business, I also maintain our school's mentorship program. As such, I can identify those who are doing great, as well as those who need guidance to do better, and can help them seek assistance. For the past ten years as Behrend's Faculty Athletics Representative (FAR) to the NCAA, I have been able to educate other FARs by presenting at our national annual meetings. I was recently selected as a facilitator for the 2019 NCAA Division III FAR Fellows Institute in Indianapolis and have presented to a national audience on the benefits of having an engaged FAR on campus at the 2018 NCAA National Convention.

Overall, teaching is about conveying knowledge in a manner that is engaging for others. I liken this to a seasoned stage actor where the performance is fantastic and engaging, but the audience doesn't see the countless hours of preparation. That is how I strive to teach. If students are engaged, they will learn.