

Mary C. Connerty: Philosophy of Teaching

Learning is like breathing to me. Having the opportunity to get up each day and learn more with my students is a great privilege. Using questions adapted from Nancy Chism's article, *Developing a Philosophy of Teaching Statement*, I reflect below on my views of effective learning and teaching, and why I feel fortunate to be part of this profession.

What do we mean by learning?

I see learning as the act of discovery, figuring out puzzles. I loved learning as a child; school was a place of magic, where I could travel the world, perform scientific feats, communicate with the past, and more. It never lost its magic for me. That rush of feelings that occurs when you discover something for yourself for the first time can not be described. In addition, I was fortunate enough to be exposed to languages and world travel at a young age; this was another exciting discovery – puzzling out how to communicate in various languages was intoxicating and began my passion for the study of languages, communication, and culture. The most effective teachers I have ever had were those who led me to discover the answers to the puzzles myself and who delighted in watching me learn. I still see myself as a learner and my students as co-creators in a learning process where we all get to discover some new truth, the answers to some new puzzle.

How do I facilitate the learning process for my students?

Though I think of myself as a natural-born learner, teaching came late to me, and I had to consciously work at mastering skills that would make me effective on the other side of the desk. What I have learned about this process is the following:

1. When I am passionate about the subject matter I am sharing with my students, they seem to respond with equal enthusiasm. Passion and enthusiasm, however, are only the starting points.
2. In order to be effective, I, as the instructor, must combine sound theory based on current research with effective pedagogy.
3. My disciplinary interests and experiences influence each other and play a part in the classroom. For example, my work with non-native English-speaking (ELL) students is influenced by my background in linguistics, rhetoric, composition, and second language acquisition, and my teaching of technical writing is framed by my professional experience as a technical writer along with my theoretical background in rhetoric and composition.

What are my goals for the students?

I want my students to become engaged learners, critical thinkers, and effective world citizens. I encourage students to take an active role in the classroom - discussing, questioning, and engaging with the material and each other. I set clear objectives to guide lessons and assignments, and make sure students are aware of these objectives so that they become active participants in the process of setting and accomplishing goals. In addition, for writing courses, real rhetorical situations must determine those objectives, encouraging the use and study of language and the writing process in a meaningful way.

How do I operationalize my philosophy of teaching in the classroom?

I actively seek to create a student-centered classroom where students participate in directing their objectives. I see myself as a guide and co-learner, working side-by-side with my students, sometimes to identify the puzzles, sometimes to solve them. In order to do this, I often integrate several different methods in my classroom to accommodate students' various learning styles. Various methods include brief lectures, individual writing, class discussion, group work, technology-based tasks, and more.

What goals have I set for myself as a learner and a teacher?

My various scholarly interests are all grounded in my passion for the study of language: how it works, how it is used to communicate, and how it can influence people and society. I have focused my research on experiences and challenges from my classroom. For example, my current scholarship arose out of the direct need I saw in my classes where I was working with two very different groups of ELL students (traditional international students and New American immigrant students). Though these students are typically grouped together, they have very distinct language learning and instructional backgrounds and experiences which influence their present level of English competency. This informs how they might acquire further English language skills. Similarly, much of what I experiment with in the classroom has grown from my research, as I try to introduce students to new ways of learning or looking at information. Both of my roles, classroom instructor and lifelong student, spur me on to continue to grow, learn, and share my passion.