

Teaching Philosophy

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I have vivid memories of walking into my first classroom in 1989 as a teaching assistant. I had just begun my master's program in communication and it was typical for graduate students to have the sole responsibility of teaching (under the supervision of a graduate adviser, of course). While I had dutifully attended preliminary workshops on pedagogy (which included lesson planning, assessment strategies, and grading) I was extremely ill-equipped for what I later learned is the most important aspect of teaching; that is—creating a conducive environment in which students actively *engage* in the learning process as collaborators. Through trial and error, I learned that the content of a course delivered by means of information sharing alone or “instruction” never *speaks* for itself when it comes to learning. That is, approaching teaching as only a one-way activity often fails to capture the complex nature of teaching and learning as a dynamic, two-way *communicative* phenomenon between teacher and students. I now realize that the best way for me to teach is to focus upon creating this dynamic communicative space in which the exploration of ideas becomes one of the key elements of our experience together in the classroom. So the course content or subject matter is certainly one of the necessary ingredients but it is not sufficient—in and of itself—to foster learning.

I must be willing to go further with my students in our exploration of the topic. I must be willing to risk my authorial voice to some extent in order to create a more *dialogic* meeting during our time together. The dialogic philosophers tell us that the hallmark of dialogue is the creation of mutual respect between speaker and listener which establishes the ground for open, collaborative investigation and critical reflection. A “genuine dialogue” is one that focuses on “us” or what we are creating together about ideas and the meanings we take from those shared ideas. And while many experienced teachers will complain that our generation of students want merely to be “spoon fed” the material with little effort expended, I have found this to be the case only when they are not taught *how* to actively engage in the process or challenged to do so. As such, I have developed an in-class assignment simply called “class dialogue” (included as part of this teaching dossier). I have used this assignment for several years in many of my classes and now I believe such pedagogical practices are commonly referred to as “flipping the classroom.” One of my objectives in creating this assignment is to demonstrate to students *how* to actively engage course material in a collaborative way that produces not only knowledge on a given topic but deeper insight through shared understanding. While new students to my courses always fear their first dialogue, by the end of the course students indicate how much this assignment helped them learn and integrate the material into their own lives.

So I have discovered, especially with the students of today, that this mutuality found in dialogue is more easily achieved when we teach students how to “play” with ideas, i.e., how to discuss and interrogate the ideas using reflexive and recursive processes of thinking. This is what my class dialogue assignment attempts to do. Now I am not claiming that learning should always be “fun”—although we often talk about it that way (and students often characterize my class dialogue assignment as a fun way to learn). Instead, I am using the idea of play in the sense communication theorist Gregory Bateson uses it—an activity that combines imaginative thinking with knowledge building; he calls this change or learning process “serious play.” It is “playful” because it is based upon engaging in an imaginative process of trial and error thinking—testing the limits of knowing and understanding. It is “serious” because the consequences of not testing the limits can be dire to human change, growth, and further development.

I work diligently to foster creative learning environments for my students by approaching them ultimately as communicative spaces, where mutual respect, care, and listening to the other is highly valued. I have found that no two class discussions on the same material are ever alike. And similar to most genuine conversations we have with others—at least the most satisfying ones—it is the unpredictability of our encounters with others that continues to intrigue us, continues to entice us to enter into *more* dialogue—to *learn* more about self, others, and the world around us.