

Running head: Teaching Philosophy

Teaching Philosophy

Tonjala Eaton

EAD 866 Teaching in Postsecondary Education

Michigan State University

May 4, 2009

Teaching Philosophy

My responsibility as an educator is to increase knowledge, develop talents and inspire change. I arrived at this viewpoint as a result of my professional experiences in leadership development, diversity training and community organizing, all of which were committed to promoting equality and social justice. Educating and motivating others to achieve their best possible selves was the underpinning of all my former roles and the basis for my current outlook on teaching.

As students interact with the content, they are able to realize new ways of being and thinking. As a result of applying new knowledge to existing problems and developing innovative solutions, students are able to realize their untapped potential, thereby enhancing new gifts. Inspiring positive change in the individual and equipping students with the necessary skills to solve society's complex problems is the cumulative impact of the educational process.

As described by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), teaching and learning are gateways to personal freedom, which encourage both the educator and pupil to authentically commit to the learning experience through honest and unbiased dialogue. Through the process of dialogue and interacting with the content, self-actualization occurs for all those involved. Self-actualization, as used by Maslow is "the desire for self-fulfillment" (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 169). Moreover, students are able to connect with their inner voice that allows them a deeper insight into themselves. Discovering my own voice, as an undergraduate student, was the most liberating experience, because I felt like my external disposition finally united with my inner man and I was content. In that regard, my task is to create learning environments and systems, whereby self-actualization can occur.

Learning Environment

In order to establish academically stimulating and safe learning environments, I employ the Twelve Principles for Adult Learning, which enables me to nurture communication among students (Vella, 2002, p. 4). These principles allow me to approach each learning session by understanding students' needs and honoring them as human beings that bring a wealth of expertise to the learning environment. By demonstrating to students that I care about them as people and their prior history, I begin to build sound relationships and rapport. To consistently show learners respect, I address students by their names when at all possible (Palmer, 1998). As an educator, it is important for me to model behavior that should be replicated in the learning environment.

The learning environment should strive to achieve greatness and intellectual curiosity; therefore, I embrace diversity of viewpoints in the environment (Palmer, 1998). True learning and personal development occurs by exploring viewpoints different from our own. Diversity of viewpoints may lead to creative conflict, which can alter personal bias and prejudice (Palmer, 1998). Furthermore, I am proponent of less formal structure and invite students to learn from the process of completing tasks and overcoming educational challenges. At times, ambiguity can be perceived as negative; however, in the learning environment ambiguity redirects attention from achieving the final outcome to learning from the process undertaken to reach results.

Students are the focal point of the learning environment and being certain that they comprehend content and are able to apply newly acquired skills in real world context are my primary objectives. Through balancing the power traditionally bestowed upon teachers, I engage students in the learning process very early in the learning experience. For instance, at the

beginning of each course I ask students to review the tentative syllabus for clarity and the ability to realistically achieve all the obligations (Weimer, 2002). By doing so, my actions allow students to recognize my humility and attentiveness to their success.

Student Learning

I believe that students learn best through complete involvement of all senses; bell hooks would describe this as involving the mind, body and spirit (1994). Others would simply categorize this as experiential learning, defined as the concept of learning being hands-on and students are active participants in the learning process. Students are not learners by themselves, once they have entered into the learning environment; they become a community of learners. The situative theory of learning best describes my methods for educating (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). By socializing learners in the new context of what is being studied, they became more aware of the behavioral norms of the specific disciplines learned. According to Pratt (1998), the Apprenticeship perspective is influenced by the value of experiential learning and hands-on development and allows teachers to instruct in the area of skills building and understanding how communities and vocations operate. With this perspective in mind, I believe it is my role to create opportunities for students to envision themselves in the future roles and create viable pathways to achieve their goals.

I employ experiential learning principles and strategies to engage students in inquiry and critical thinking through using a variety of learning strategies. Case studies, team collaboration, immediate feedback assessments, lectures, game simulations and research paper are all examples of the types of assignments I give to help reach a variety of learning styles. I am aware that students learn differently; therefore, utilizing various learning tools and assignments, I strive to reach all of my students (McKeachie, 2006).

Collective Responsibility

My goal for each group of students in a course or workshop is for them to view each classmate as a part of a learning community, in which each person is a contributing member to the learning experience. In the *Courage to Teach*, Palmer (1998) states, “my students will learn much more when I turn their eyes from always looking at me and help them look at one another.” Combating the natural tendency for students to seek answers from teachers is a lofty objective, because it counters traditional form of teaching. Yet, with appropriate guidance from the instructor I think it is doable.

In order to accomplish the task of establishing learning communities, I will follow Palmer’s lead in deflecting student comments and referring them to the group. Depending on the length of the class or session, each group will have to complete a group project, along with a group assessment. Group assessments build the capacity for learners to depend on each other and aid group members through the learning experience.

Student Assessment

Assessments are traditionally linked to grading; however, I view assessment as feedback tools to evaluate student learning. Learning-centered teaching values the use of grades and use assessment to promote learning (Weimer, 2002). Yes, I want students to be concerned with their grades, but more importantly, I want them to know that they are learning. Additionally, I teach students how to self-assess their own learning. As a result, I encourage students to keep a learning journal to record what they believe they have learned and areas that are unclear. Before the beginning of each lesson on a new topic, I ask students to write about how much they know about the subject. After the completion of the lesson, they reflect on what they have learned about the subject and compare their pre- and post- lesson notes. This is just one strategy to

enable students to self-assess their own development. Through encouraging self-assessment, I create opportunities for learning to occur beyond the limited time we have in class or during a workshop.

Exams are used to stimulate learning in areas that students may have forgotten. Consequently, students are able to have power in creating the mid-term exam by drafting test questions. I collect the questions and develop the exam from the students' pre-drafted questions (Weimer, 2002). This technique forces students to review the material and increase their learning in the process. Near the end of my courses, I review the learning objectives to guarantee that we have covered the necessary material.

Student Evaluation

I believe that students must be able to share in the learning process through allowing their voices to be heard. Student evaluation is a mechanism to incorporate student perceptions and reactions about the learning experience in the maintenance of the course. I pledge to allow my students the opportunity to provide constant feedback by asking for their opinions of the course content at the beginning and end of the course. In order to have richer feedback, I encourage students to communicate with me regarding the activities they enjoy or dislike on a regular basis. Yet, I incorporate feedback in the learning process by allowing students to write anonymously about their experiences in the learning environment. My approach to teaching is very unconventional; therefore, it is important for me to solicit student feedback in order to assess the strategies that are ineffective and those that are successful.

Self Evaluation

Teaching is a process requiring continuous growth and development. Although I am an educator, I am a learner at the same time. As Fink suggests (1995), teachers who self-evaluate

have a greater propensity to achieve their full teaching potential compared to those who do not. Therefore, it is necessary for me to incorporate self-evaluation into my learning designs. Student assessments and feedback forms are the first point of evaluations. Secondly, I use audio and video recordings to critique the delivery of my lesson plans. I use the mediums of self-evaluation to analyze my vocal tone and body language. Throughout my professional career, these are areas in which I have received the most constructive feedback. For that reason, I take precautionary measures to be certain that my delivery is not hampered vocal range and body language.

The most beneficial of professional development for me is to remain connected to my peers and conduct peer reviews. These are opportunities to hear about my performance from highly trained individuals whom I respect and admire. Also, I am a member of several professional associations and organizations in the field of adult learning.

References

- Fink, L. (1995). Evaluating your own teaching. In P. Seldin (Ed.) *From Improving College Teaching*. (191-204). Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, Instructional Development Program.
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress*. Great Britain: Rutledge.
- Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible Selves. *American Psychologist*. 41(9), 954-969.
- McKeachie, W. Svinicki, M (2006.) *McKeachie's teaching tips: strategies, research and theory for college and university teachers*. Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston
- Merriam, S., Caffarella, R. & Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Pratt, D. (1998). *Five Perspectives on Teaching in adult and higher education*. Malabar, FL: Kreiger Publishing Company.
- Vella, J. (2002). *Learning to listen learning to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner Centered Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.