

Writing Your Teaching Philosophy

What is a Teaching Philosophy?

A teaching philosophy is “a personal set of values in teaching that ... represents the important and stable ideas, beliefs, assumptions that affect our behaviours” (Fuhrman and Grasha, 1999).

Why a Teaching Philosophy?

Our belief systems shape our perspectives about teaching and learning and influence our approaches to practice. Yet, we often do not know what our philosophies are and how they impact on our actions. As a teacher, it is essential to know your philosophy about teaching and learning because it will dictate your perspectives and actions in the learning environment and have repercussions on the learners in your classroom. Knowing your teaching philosophy is the first step in knowing who you are as a teacher, learner and individual, and this knowledge puts you in a better place to deal with your actions and reactions in the learning environment. Two imperatives exist: *articulate* your philosophy and *reflect* on it.

Write Your Teaching Philosophy

The following questions can help you to start writing your philosophy. Try to answer them and write your answers.

Think About Yourself as a Teacher

1. To what extent have your own teaching experiences affected how you teach or how you learn? Consider both positive and negative experiences.
2. Have you developed any personal theories or perspectives as a result?

Think About the Student

3. What do you do/would you like to do in your classroom with and for your students?
4. Why do/would you do what you do?

Think About Learning

5. How do you perceive learning?
6. How will/has this perception influence(d) the activities in your classroom?
7. Have you developed any personal theories or perspectives as a result of these perspectives?

Now that you have written the components of your teaching philosophy, *reflect* on what you have written.

Box 1 is a teaching philosophy that was written by an award-winning UWI lecturer, Dr. John Campbell, who sadly passed away in 2018. Read his philosophy and then *reflect again* on yours.

Box 1: Teaching Philosophy of Dr. John Campbell

My teaching philosophy has been shaped by my own schooling experience. In spite of all my accomplishments at school, one of the things I remember most is that I hated maths. I can still evoke the feelings of inadequacy accompanied by memories of constantly arriving at wrong answers on the chalkboard and standing aside while a 'smarter' student provided the correct workings and answers. The point at which I begin my discussion of teaching philosophy clearly shows that the experience was not limited to my childhood, but continues to impact on my life 30 odd years after. Thus the learning experience negative or positive can shape our sense of who we are and indeed who we are to become.

In fact the negative experiences can prove to be most memorable. Strange as it seems, I do remember the teachers who were responsible for my early hatred of maths. They were good at what they did content wise, but their more lasting impact lay in how they made me feel about myself. Their failings lay in how they impacted on my personhood and then in turn affected my ability to benefit from what they were good at. I was not motivated to want to learn their content. I can still remember the awe I felt when they made strange calculations on the board and drew weird trigonometric designs that made sense only to them and some of my 'smarter' classmates. There was, however, also a group of us who felt lost and were too afraid to say how lost we felt. Thus the learning philosophy was limited, and did not reach out to all the students in the class. This in turn meant that the mathematical potential of only a portion of the class was tapped. We may not have all gone on to do degrees in mathematics, but we each may have had a bigger contribution to make through the application of skills which we could have learnt and applied to other areas. Ultimately, it is our society which has lost. This experience has shaped my own philosophy of teaching. Effective teaching should not alienate any potential learner, especially the learners most at risk. In fact, I believe that effective teaching should reach out to the learners with the least ability, those who may otherwise be considered at the "bottom" of the class.

A philosophy of teaching, in my opinion, must see firstly to be all encompassing. This 'all encompassing' ideal occurs at two fundamental levels: focus and content. Firstly, it must cater to the needs of all within the focus group. This means that the philosophy should be able to take into account the different ideas and learning potentials of the entire group. Further, it must cater to these different potentials in a supportive manner. Oftentimes, in the quest for excellence, the assumption is made that excellence occurs at one academic point. While this is often true (at a cold statistical level) one has also to realize that excellence occurs differently for different students. The 'A' student that routinely attains this marker is consistently excellent and would in fact be deemed a 'failure' if he subsequently scored a 'B'. However, for the so called 'underachiever' or the 'D' student the attainment of a 'B' is a red letter day. One's philosophy of teaching must reward and encourage all levels of potential. This is the first ideal of 'all encompassing'.

Secondly, the philosophy should be all encompassing in terms of its actual content. This does not mean that specialization is not attainable. However, by being all encompassing in its content, it realises that opportunities can always be created for incidental learning that may not constitute the main theme of the session. The teacher then has the option to either ignore these new teaching opportunities or work them into the presentation. By having an 'all encompassing' approach the specific content is broadened (without losing focus) to allow for incidental topics to be taught.

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Box 1: Teaching Philosophy of Dr. John Campbell

Indeed this is an important point because learning of itself is often out of the direct control of the teacher. It takes place, often, without notice and without a specific queue. By having a teaching philosophy that is broader in terms of its content the teacher will be providing an 'education', properly so called. One that focuses on the individual's attainment of a broader scope of knowledge beyond the narrow focus of the particular session.

The basic point is that there is no room for rigidity. A Teaching philosophy cannot be rigid in its directional basis because learning is not. As such, the philosophy of teaching needs to be adaptable to the situation. This means that it can be both teacher led and student led. A good teaching philosophy can ensure that the message gets across regardless of which side of the teaching divide the initiative comes from. A good teaching philosophy is then, as a result dualistically respectful. In this context it assumes, firstly, that all the parties concerned are learners. As such they (student and instructor) are both open to improvement. In terms of the incidental lessons being taught ... the teacher often has lessons being taught to him but he ignores these (or is not receptive to them) because of the belief that the teaching flow is unidirectional. By fostering a sense of mutual respect and potential for growth, and by respecting differentiated learning abilities and rewarding such a teaching philosophy will foster a positive learning environment for all parties concerned.

As a result of these considerations and experiences my teaching philosophy has evolved a number of goals which I strive to score in my lecture sessions. Firstly, students should be able to assimilate the information that I have given them. However, in order to ensure maximum assimilation the nature of their learning experience is given particular focus. Secondly, and perhaps most simply, it must be an enjoyable experience. Thirdly, students must also feel comfortable questioning the information they have been given. More importantly, they should be able to critique it. This I feel is the desired end as their ability to critique the information will show their mastery not only of the content but their mastery also of the underlying ontologies that facilitate the knowledge environment. I often think that the ideal student is not one who is able to blindly repeat all that his teacher has taught him but rather one who is able, based on what was taught, to question the teacher about aspects that both he and perhaps even the instructor, have now thought about for the first time.

To this end therefore a key learning tool of one of my main courses: FOUN1101 Caribbean Civilisation, has been the implementation of a book report as well as a critical thinking coursework component. Both activities are weighted and count towards the final marks of the students...

In the end I believe that both my students and I will benefit. The students will benefit from the enhanced learning environment and from mastering the discipline. I will benefit as I will not be constrained by the limits of my own thinking and what I have been taught are the boundaries of my discipline. As a person it will allow me to enjoy a closer interaction with my students beyond the rubrics of my particular discipline and, by facilitating learning, I too will experience growth.

(End)