

Running Head: PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING

Perspectives on Teaching
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Prepared for: _____

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Perspectives on Teaching

“The ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his education.” ~ John W. Gardner

Teachers often lament that students are neither responsible for nor concerned with their education. After all, it would make our jobs as educators much easier if students would come to class with the internal and external motivation necessary to excel in the academy. If students were prepared for class and eager to learn, it would allow teachers to focus their efforts on quenching their slakeless thirst for knowledge, rather than spending countless hours concocting (or attempting to concoct) new formulas to inspire student motivation. ‘Students as active learners’ is a sentiment often repeated in academic circles, and to this end our teaching efforts are often aimed at those students who can make the metamorphoses from passive students to active learners. We often direct our teaching to the good students – those active learners – with the understanding that you simply can’t teach all of the students all of the time. While this is an efficient strategy, I wonder then what we do with those other students – the students who remain in their cretinous cocoons; those students who we assume are motivated only by their own selfish ends and unwilling to work towards a greater goal.

Gardner's sentiment that the academy is charged with the task of facilitating the transition of the locus of learning from the learning institution to the learning individual resonates strongly with me. If we hope to guide our students' education to the highest levels, we have to inspire them not only to learn, but to learn how to learn. I view learning as a maturation process, not only for students' understanding of course-relevant content, but for their understanding of the world at large. But unlike the caterpillar, who has it in his or her nature to change into a Monarch butterfly when the time is proper, students do not necessarily have it in their nature to mature into scholars.

Or do they?

Concluding Remarks

I hope this philosophical statement has given you some insight into my pedagogical orientation. As I progress through my career, and develop my own meta-cognitive thoughts on teaching, I will revisit this document often. Although no doubt I will progress and develop as an instructor throughout my career, the thoughts presented in this philosophy shall serve as the guide with which I use to establish this growth. This document shall serve as the anchor of my teaching practices.

Signed,

Nicholas David Bowman

The Role of the Teacher and the Role of the Student

Motivation research suggests that humans are inquisitive by nature, and are rather adept at – and interested in – learning about their environment. It has been further suggested that perhaps the environment that one learns in has a greater effect on learning objectives and outcomes than the inherent disposition of the learner. In fact, the learning environment – of which we as instructors play a pivotal role – may well serve as one of the most important catalysts in inspiring student metamorphosis.

During my time as an instructor-in-training, I have accepted my role in this process. Moreover, I have adopted the following tenets to help ensure my role in this process is at least not harmful to student development, and at most it is as beneficial and necessary to the learning process as the academic edifice itself. These short-yet-important statements shape the essence of my teaching philosophy, and are divided into three sections: “*Teachers Should...*”, “*Students Need To...*”, and “*Good Teaching Is ...*”.

“Teachers Should...”

- ...accept the burden of responsibility for encouraging student growth. Teachers must want their students to grow and learn.
- ...make this process as painless as possible, but should not shield the student from growing pains, as these are indicators of a job well done. Teachers must understand that learning hurts, and must let their students hurt a bit during the process.
- ...be cognizant of the objective world, and work to connect students with content, while framing this content in an applicable and useful way. Teachers must be well-rounded, and work to create teachable moments to place course material in real-world context whenever possible.
- ...inspire their students to gain a better understanding as to where their own subjective reality is formed. Teachers should inspire their students’ meta-cognitive abilities, and help them understand where their thoughts about the world come from.
- ...serve as mentors, understanding that students are not in possession of the same level of knowledge and comprehension of material, and do what is necessary to bring students’ levels up to their own. Teachers should expect that students are capable of understanding material at the highest levels, and push students toward that goal.
- ...constantly assess students’ growth, not just with grades and points, but with active feedback and qualitative judgment. Teachers should be aware of the progress of their students, and should not be afraid to make changes to the classroom as needed to ensure positive growth.

“A student in my classroom would expect ...”

- “...someone with a special gift to reach out to everyone as if they matter in a classroom, and peak students’ interests...”
- “...[an instructor who] go[es] out of his way to help his students, whether it is holding special review sessions before finals, asking our opinions on how test questions were written or making sure we stayed on track with our research assignments...”
- “...[an instructor who is able to] connect with students, get information across in a lively way, and demand excellence.”
- “...enthusiasm unrivaled by other instructors in the department...”
- “...many new ideas from [students], [used as examples] where he would further explain how our ideas could work [in other contexts]...”
- “...[an instructor who shows] more excitement and persistence than [any University] could hope for.”
- “...impeccable people skills [used] to relate with all of his students, which creates a comfortable atmosphere for students to ask questions and interact with the rest of the class...”
- “...[that] you could never forget some of his stories even if you tried and for this reason, you would never forget the concept he was teaching...”
- “...someone who provides a comfortable learning atmosphere that promotes class participation and constant interaction.”

assessments also give me insight into what they are struggling with, so that I can re-address those concepts if needed, perhaps using a different teaching strategy.

I was recently asked by a colleague to describe what my classroom was like from the student's point of view. The next and final section contains excerpts from recent teaching evaluations and student testimonials on my behalf; I hope that these can give a glimpse into the classroom experience that I create, by answering the statement: *"A student in my classroom would expect ..."*

"Students Need To..."

- ...accept the burden of responsibility for ensuring their own growth. Students must want to grow and learn before they can develop as scholars.
- ...expect teachers to safely lead the way, yet expect some level of discomfort, even pain, during the process. Students must understand that learning hurts, and must be ready to work through any pain toward an end goal.
- ...be cognizant of the objective world, and strive to see connections between themselves and the content they are studying, while placing these connections in an applicable and useful way. Students must well-rounded, and should work to find links between classroom knowledge and the world at large.
- ...express their opinions of the subjective reality, and strive to understand how course content fits into this world, as well as where their understanding of the subjective world comes from. Students should work hard to identify the roots of their understanding of the world.
- ...recognize that their levels of knowledge and comprehension of material may not be equal to that of the teacher, but expect that it can be. Students must understand that they are in the process of learning, and that there may be a gap between their understanding and the instructors. Closing this gap should serve as a motivator for learning.
- ...be constantly aware of the learning process, and provide progress indicators to their teachers, both in terms of classroom performance and qualitative reflection. Students need to communicate progress with their teachers so that changes can be made as needed.

“Good Teaching Is...”

- ...the process of student growth. It is a surgical strike of sorts, with a bit of anesthetic along the way, while allowing for some necessary discomfort as a way to indicate that indeed something has happened/is happening/will eventually happen.
- ...students and teachers ‘knowing’ an objective world, and connecting themselves with content in an applicable and useful way. It is that moment when an observer has difficulty distinguishing between teacher and student based on knowledge levels alone.
- ...when the roots of one’s subjective world are shaken, stirred, and replanted with the confidence and care of an expert green thumb.
- ...watching an instructor lead his or her pack of students to a higher level of comprehension.

The Structure and Experience of my Classroom

It is well-documented that students learn in a variety of ways. Insofar as I have a profound respect for the art of the lecture – and thus tend to prefer this type of classroom format – I also recognize that it may not be the most preferred or effective style for all learning objectives. As I have been exposed to other styles of teaching – cooperative, collaborative, and experiential – I have begun to see how each could be used to help connect students to material. Specifically, each can provide a goodness of fit for my teaching equation given a specific situation and learning goal. Recently, I have found myself experimenting with several different styles of teaching, with positive results. Research into pedagogical style shows us that different students learn differently, and ignorance of these differences would do a great disservice to the students in my classroom. Hence, I work to incorporate different course formats throughout the semester based on learning objectives for each course session, as well as assess student learning throughout the semester to ensure that the majority of students understand the majority of the material the majority of the time. This assessment often comes in the form of reflection papers, open-ended survey questions, and notebook reviews. Beyond giving me some insight into what the students are learning, these