

# Teaching Philosophy — Final

## David R. Guinnup - November 27, 2020

“A teaching (philosophy) statement is a purposeful and reflective essay about the author’s teaching beliefs and practices. It is an individual narrative that includes not only one’s beliefs about the teaching and learning process but also concrete examples of the ways in which he or she enacts these beliefs in the classroom.”<sup>1</sup>

My beliefs about teaching stem from this course, and from the experiences and observations I have had: first, as a Boy Scout adult leader, and second, helping teach and coordinate two large sections (50 to 160 students) of a GenEd course each semester over approximately the last nine years. My primary reasons for taking this course is to improve the GenEd course that I coordinate and help teach, People, Places and Environment (PPE — CTRP 0807), and improve my performance in the roles I play in the course.

I view teaching as a service — a service to the student, the public, and future generations — with service to the student being the more immediate and critical priority. As a teacher/educator, I believe that I have the responsibility to create learning environments that foster/promote deep critical thinking and problem solving, and assist students to become reflective thinkers.

How can I achieve this goal set? I believe that I must do more than just cover and transfer topical content via basically one way lectures, in which I, the expert talks, and the students listen and take notes. Rather, I must provide a variety of learning environments, group discussions, activities, and writing exercises to encourage and successfully induce student thinking, and stimulate better oral and written expression. A variety of contexts deepens learning, and helps students organize knowledge for better retention. Also, I must provide opportunities for students to apply fundamental concepts and idea.

I believe it is important of recognize the role of and limitations that prior knowledge has on student learning, especially for first and second year college students, and respond appropriately. I have a colleague instructor that advises students to find the “Golden Nuggets” in the assigned readings, and often includes questions on exams based on what the colleague identifies as “Golden Nuggets.” The major problem with this approach is that what resonates with my colleague, is not necessarily what resonates with students, or even myself (and the colleague and I are educated and experienced in the same field). What resonates depends on prior knowledge and experience. If students have not likely previously encountered a topic or concept in their private or academic lives, an instructor needs to be explicit and consistent about what they believe are the important points in the material. Such low probability is the situation with PPE.

I believe that knowledge is built upon knowledge, and that with guidance, practice, and even some repetition, knowledge can be built and organized block by block toward mastery. Therefore, in lecturing, I believe it is important to open the lesson, in capsule style, with a reminder of what was learned in the previous lesson, how that relates to the current lesson, and later, close with a summary of the major points of the current lesson — a belief that I try to routinely put into action, sometimes with strategically placed polls. I also think that nongraded

---

<sup>1</sup> From the Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching website: “What is a teaching statement?” ([https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-statements/#what\\_is](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-statements/#what_is)) and “4 Teaching Philosophy Statement Examples: Develop Your Own Teaching Philosophy,” Janelle Cox, Updated March 06, 2020, at ThoughtCo.com.

self-assessment “quizzes” are helpful in building as student’s mastery and confidence.

I believe that it is important to provide plenty of opportunities for student participation and questioning to draw out students. This objective can be accomplished by merely breaking lectures up at strategic intervals to ask a question or conduct a poll (objective or opinion). More formal tools can be used (via breakout groups, discussion boards, Think/Write-Pair-Share, and real collaborations). Doing so is part of building a sense of community, providing different contexts for practice, and assessing learning. However, building community must start on day one with introductions and sharing some information about each other relevant to the course (for large enrollment classes, data collection via a LMS survey is necessary). In response to the pandemic, I created and facilitated discussion breakout groups for the first day of class to enable students to share there experiences, concerns, and hopes — the elephant in the room.

Providing frequent and meaningful feedback to students, including assessments (both non-graded self, and graded) of performance and learning, is vital. If participation is important, that message needs to be clearly conveyed to students by making it a significant element of the course grade. Discussion Boards need clear expectations, and the instructors must routinely monitor and respond in timely manner to student contributions. Even in a teaching team, the lead instructor needs to participate in Discussion Boards, otherwise the message of their importance becomes diluted. Where multiple graders are involved for major written assignments explicit rubrics are important for establishing a reasonable degree of consistency among graders. These are areas where the PPE course needs improvement.

Providing a safe zone is important for exploring and discussing the many dimensions and aspects of inclusiveness and diversity — not just diversity of ideas and opinions, but also of experience, culture, race, ethnic background, gender, political persuasion, socioeconomic class, and physical/mental challenge. This task includes providing an accurate historical background and context. Over the past year, with my prodding, we introduced the story of African-American migrations and settlement into the PPE course — a story previously completely absent from the course. While not perfect, progress is being made. Second, I recognized that the killing of Philadelphian Walter Wallace, Jr. with subsequent protests, violence, and curfews was the elephant in the classroom, and provided a critical teaching and learning moment. Earlier in the week, I learned of the death of Bernard Cohen, the lead ACLU attorney in *Loving vs Virginia*, which could provide us with hope in this moment of community tragedy. So, I created 10 slides, I asked for 8 to 10 minutes at the beginning of class on 11/29/2020 to talk about what happen, but end on a hopeful note. (In response to a request, I repeated the presentation for a graduate class.)

Within the GenEd universe, students should have significant choice in selecting the subjects of major writing assignments. In PPE, the first assignment topic is wide open as long as the student can show how it relates to People, Places and Environment. The culminating essay is limited to one of five topic categories. They can write about something that they like and interests them.

I believe students should be provided with some practical information and perspectives that will be generally valuable in their adult lives as citizens, consumers, dwellers, travelers, producers, or even soldiers. I provide supplemental material to improve understanding and terminology use of certain technical fundamentals such as topography, slope, floodplains, visualizing land area, energy, water, and transportation. I traditionally, present a customized version of the Runaway Trolley ethical dilemma problem as an introduction to the “Ethos” part of the PPE course.