

Teaching with Technology Philosophy — Final

David R. Guinnup* - April 22, 2021

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 deep analytical critical thinking and problem solving, and assist students to become reflective thinkers. If I find a technology that will likely enable me to enhance the learning environment and improve learning outcomes, then I owe to my students to try it, and if it works, use it routinely where applicable.**

My beliefs about teaching primarily stem from my participation in the Temple University (TU) Teaching in Higher Education Certificate Program, and from the experiences and observations I have had: first, as a Boy Scout adult leader, and second, helping teach and coordinate two large enrollment sections of a GenEd course each semester over the last nine years. The course is entitled People, Places and Environment (PPE). Traditionally, this course has been conducted by lecture in physical classrooms, but with my support has gradually incorporated more active learning elements. The greatest leap was in response to the coronavirus pandemic which required a shift to highly technologically dependent synchronous virtual online teaching. Some of approaches and technologies used during the pandemic have shown sufficient value to merit retention when in-person physical classrooms resume.

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 ideas.

I recognize the role of and limitations that prior knowledge has on student learning, especially for first and second year college students, and I attempt to respond appropriately. PPE covers material that most students likely have not encountered in their family, school, or social lives. So, I build a progressive scaffolding of readings, mini-lectures, videos, self-assessments, surveys, polls, and discussion boards.

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 self-assessment “quizzes” are helpful in building a student’s mastery and confidence. In writing quiz and exam questions, I include analytical and application questions.

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.

I believe that 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 routine monitoring. As an instructor, I respond in timely manner to student contributions, so that their importance does not become diluted. Where multiple graders are involved for major written assignments explicit rubrics are important for establishing a reasonable degree of consistency among graders.

Being inclusive is important. A book of readings is required, but very expensive. With the cooperation of the Temple University Library, I organized the retrieval, scanning, and placement of the source materials into the LMS feature called “Course Reserves.”

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. Second, I think it is essential to bring major current events and controversies into the classroom — they provide fantastic teachable moments. As an example, this Fall, I recognized that the killing of Philadelphian Walter Wallace, Jr. with subsequent protests, violence, and curfews was the elephant in the classroom. So, I created 10 slides, I used 8 to 10 minutes at the beginning of class on 11/29/2020 to discuss what happen, but ended on a hopeful note. (In response to a request, I repeated the presentation for a graduate class.) I believe it is a mistake to be blind to what is happening outside the classroom, but one must be selective, well prepared, and careful.

Maintaining a safe zone also means providing students with a 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. Another area, where some choice allowed is in the lesson entitled "American Migrations in History and Issues of Social Equity." As homework, prior to class, students view 5 short video clips and participate in two of three different Canvas Discussion Boards. During class, there is a brief lecture. The bulk of class time is in Zoom Breakout Rooms discussing some of the issues and problems raised in the videos, lecture, and discussion boards. Advance thought and writing about the lesson theme increases active oral participation by a broader array of students.

* My Role As the Course Coordinator: I am responsible for designing, implementing, managing, and monitoring the Learning Management System (LMS) user interface for the PPE Course, and most of its key elements including announcements, assignments, “modules,” discussion boards, quizzes, polls, grade-book, “Course Reserves,” etc. I also design and manage the spreadsheets, documents, graphic presentations, and informational videos that support the course. I grade most of the assessments, host polls, surveys, and breakout sessions. I also do some lecturing. David R. Guinnup, AICP, is a Urban and Regional Planner, and Applied Economist with over 40 years of professional experience, who is now teaching in the Temple University Department of Architecture and Environmental Design.

** If the technology makes sense for the environment when evaluated (e.g, see The SECTIONS Model, A.W. Bates, 2015).