

Teaching Philosophy

Todd Neuharth

In developing my philosophy of teaching, I have attempted to address two of the most common questions I am asked: Why are you a teacher and what do you think is required to be successful as a teacher?

Three distinct but interrelated factors have contributed to bring me to my current station. Throughout my life I have had the good fortune to be surrounded by individuals who consistently model the habits of mind leading to intellectual curiosity and discovery. Some of these individuals processed terminal or advanced degrees while others did not have a “formal” education. As a result of the family I was born into, I have been afforded a number of opportunities and experienced a number of blessings that many individuals do not get the chance to experience; these great gifts bring with them a sense of duty and responsibility which brings me to the third factor. I feel that it is incumbent on each of us to be of service to humankind. I am able to happily meet these obligations by working with students.

I believe that learning is a process of synthesis. Different people absorb material in different ways, but everyone must assemble the information into concepts that can be applied to their professional and everyday lives. The way I approach the learning process is based on a set of concepts that have come about via my experiences as a student and as an instructor.

Good teachers shouldn't give students everything they want:

Not everything that students want is necessarily in their best interest. For instance, in review sessions students often want to know what specifically is going to be on the examination. I will help students understand any concepts/areas they may be having difficulty mastering; but, I will not “teach to the test.” Tests are a sample of the universe of knowledge I expect students to comprehend. If students knew specifically what was going to be on the examination, I suspect they would act rationally and only study the specific sample rather than the material itself. “Teaching to the test” requires less effort on my part and on the students’ part, less learning would take place and I would have abdicated my responsibilities as an instructor. This point applies not only to testing; but also to course contents. I strongly object to teaching philosophies that advance the concept that “if students don’t like it, then don’t assign it.” Little worth knowing is superficially amusing or easy to comprehend. I would prefer students mastered the material as opposed to nominating me for “popularity teaching awards.” A corollary to this principle is that “good teachers challenge students” which brings me to my next point.

Good teachers don't tell students everything they want to hear:

Many of the leading instructional textbooks within my discipline are designed around the “protocol principle,” an example of this is seen in current therapeutic

rehabilitation texts. These textbooks reinforce the concept that if an individual has a specific injury then exercises x, y, and z are used to treat that injury. Students want to be told the exact course of treatment, specific methods of evaluation, exact modality to be used, or specific means of reaching a goal. I feel that “telling students exactly what they want to hear” is a breach of my duty and obligations as an instructor. My rationale for providing instruction rooted firmly in the basic sciences as opposed to a cookbook protocol stems from my beliefs that 1) the rapid doubling time with the discipline means that many of the “protocols” provided to students in their undergraduate classes will be outdated by their first year of clinical practice, 2) certified athletic trainers deal with human beings, by their very nature no norms exist, as a result there is not a “one size fits all” solution to many of the problems they will face, 3) utilizing protocols encourages two dimensional thinking and discourages critical analysis, 4) providing students with “all of the solutions” does not help them to take the next steps in becoming life-long learners.

Good teachers engage students in the learning process:

Engaging students in the learning proves, welcoming them into a community of scholars, does not require entertainment, high tech equipment, or “the latest cutting-edge pedagogy.” In fact, I believe that although the aforementioned methods can be explored and utilized to a certain degree, students are best engaged in the learning process-for a specific course or for a life-time-by an instructor who models intellectual curiosity and a desire to gain, evaluate, and share knowledge. This can be accomplished in the lecture hall, the laboratory, the library, the athletic training room, or the “quad.” Wherever and whenever a teachable moment appears, it must be utilized.

Good teachers know that they do not know everything:

I do not have all of the answers. I look forward to and encourage students to question me. I expect students to “demand to know why and to accept ‘because’ as an answer.” Not only is this a model of true and honest professional discourse for the students, it helps to better understand and gain knowledge.

Good teachers take risks:

I use a variety of instructional techniques in my attempts to arouse students’ intellectual curiosity. Some of these attempts work and some “fail miserably.” The failures will NOT stop me from attempting to improve my instructional techniques. If I have to choose between student achievement and student satisfaction, I will ALWAYS choose the former because I believe the latter will come later.

Real learning is fun, exciting, turbulent, sometimes scary, and almost never easy; it represents humankind’s greatest hope and I am overjoyed (and sometimes overwhelmed) to be part of the process.