Philosophy of Teaching

“A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning.”

–Brad Henry

As an undergraduate, I noticed that I was more motivated and excited to learn in some classes rather than in others. Some subjects commanded attention and excitement: philosophy, religion, human sexuality. While others, such as history, algebra and statistics, were predominantly attended by only students who were required to do so. One of these compulsory classes for psychology students at my undergraduate university was experimental psychology. Students lamented that they had to take this class, as it promised to be a very dry subject. In the semester that I took the course, all of the students sat in their seats on our first day of class with a sense of dread. As our teacher started the class, however, we knew this class was not going to be what we had expected. She spoke to our fears immediately by informing us that she knew we didn’t want to take this class and that it was only because it was part of our curriculum that we were even there. “Despite that,” she said, “This class will change your life.” She went on to explain how integral and influential research was a part of our society and how little people actually knew about it. She spoke about how research studies are presented on everything from diet pills to cancer treatments, and if we were not aware of how research really worked, we could be the ones being conned. And she was right: that class did change my life. What that teacher shared with our class to spark our initial interest has hence become the foundation of my teaching philosophy: real interest comes from the practicality of the subject and the applicability to the student’s life. I believe that every academic subject has this practicality and applicability, but it may not be readily visible to the student.

Over the course of my teaching experiences at both public and private universities, I have come to understand a teacher’s job as two-fold. We meet the standard objective of imparting knowledge of the subject matter we are teaching. But I believe that the art of teaching is much bigger than just dispersing knowledge and grading exams. I feel that the real goal of teaching is to aid in the development of our students as informed members of our society and to improve their quality of life.

I truly believe that technology is a significant way to achieve my teaching goals. Before students meet me in the classroom, they have access to the Blackboard Learn page that presents a great deal of my teaching style. They have access to the syllabus, course materials and understand expectations before they may have even met me. I spend a great deal of time making these pages accessible, interesting and appropriate to each class and its specific learning goals.

Once in the classroom, I believe that teachers must also first establish good rapport with their students; I believe that students should see the teacher as approachable, yet
challenging. Through verbal cues and body language, the presentation of the course and initial interactions with students, a teacher can set the stage for positive interactions in the very first class. To truly show a student how applicable and important the subject matter is, however, a connection must then be made with the students’ interests and backgrounds. Once the teacher is aware of what is important to the student, then the teacher can scaffold their interests to the new knowledge. In my first classes, I ask students to introduce themselves in class, along with their major and backgrounds. I can then capitalize on this information later in the semester to explain concepts, introduce ideas and explore theory.

When I think back to my most enjoyable teaching experiences within the past, it has to be when I teach research methodology courses and multicultural counseling courses. Within my research methodology course, I am now able to be the teacher to allay the student’s fears and show the student how this class would actually be useful to them. Since statistics and research are such a difficult (and loathed) subject, I actually begin this class with an additional exercise: I put common fears reported by students in research methods class on the PowerPoint slide, which we then read together. This illustrated that everyone had similar fears about the class, i.e. work would be too hard, class would be boring, math would give them a migraine. I then address the question directly about why they need this course. Not only do we discuss the importance of research to their respective fields, I use headlines from several newspapers. I ask my students if they believe the headlines or not. What we conclude together is that right now, they do not know how to criticize research or be a skeptical and responsible consumer of research. But I promise them, that before this class is over, they will be. In the following weeks, I also work to lower their anxiety so that they can learn more easily. I use cartoons in my PowerPoints to illustrate points or to lighten the mood and decrease student anxiety. My research lectures continue to include various mediums and consist of many real-life examples. I have found that I begin to see engaged and interested faces looking back at me. I have several students each semester that would independently bring in current research studies they had found in newspapers or magazines. At the end of the term, I usually find my students have been engaged and excited in discussion numerous times. Some students take their proposals and pursue grants to support their research. I feel confident that many of these students had absorbed this information and would retain the general ideas for years to come. Not all of my students leave this class wanting to become statisticians or researchers, but they were all leaving better-educated consumers and citizens.

In my multicultural counseling course, I have the challenge of getting students to accept some difficult concepts, like white privilege, oppression and racism. We explore the cultural influence of age, generation, developmental and physiological disability, religion, ethnicity, social status, sexual orientation, indigenous or immigrant status and gender. I use lecture, video, group discussion and experiential activities to help students become aware of their own culture, develop knowledge of other cultures and the experience of
minorities, build multicultural counseling skills, and identify a plan of action to advocate, educate and empower others. On our first day of class, I tell a story about how as a biracial individual, I face questions regarding my ethnicity, such as “What are you?” After explaining my experience, I ask each student to answer the same question. It causes each student to consider something that they may never have had to previously: what is their identity and what is its connection to their ethnicity. As we explore each multicultural concept, I provide an experiential activity and class discussion that challenges their thinking and causes them to build empathy for others, open their minds and motivate them to take action to better our world.

In terms of class structure, each class I teach typically starts with a review of the last week’s content (through the use of the interactive technology Kahoot), as well as the goals for the day’s class and the biggest ‘take home’ messages or skills that the class will be learning that day. Sometimes this translates to using quotations and symbols. I then present topics using various mediums, including quotations, comic strips, movie and internet clips embedded within PowerPoint presentations. I use PowerPoint as a visual guide through which the classes are structured; my PowerPoints contain talking points, but cannot suffice as notes. My typical assignments are reading assessments, learning assessments, class papers, presentations, participation grades and exams. I also make it a point to provide feedback to students continually through the semester via grading and reporting of their midterm grades. The learning assessments I assign are practical application assignments in order to help them learn and apply the material. Although I feel assignments and homework are a better assessment of student learning, I also feel that exams are necessary in content courses. My exams are a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and essay. For classes that contain heavy content, I provide study sessions. The secret of all of my study preparation methods are that on the surface they lower anxiety and boost self confidence; however, at the same time they require a lot of hard work and formally or informally capitalize on research-supported study methods and learning styles.

In addition to providing practical examples throughout lecture, my experiences teaching graduate level students has prompted me to develop additional teaching strategies. My personal preference is to teach graduate classes with approximately one-third to one-half of the time in engaging lectures, then the remainder of the time in practical application. This time period is accentuated by whole-class discussion questions and hands-on exercises. These provide an additional forum for students to learn the value of the class content, to practice the knowledge and skills directly, to think critically and philosophically about the topics presented and to enjoy the class. I have found that these techniques not only keep the students engaged in the course, they keep the student motivated and feeling prepared to learn even difficult material to which they may have never before been exposed.

As mentioned previously, I use technology in all aspects of my courses. I regularly use integrated videos, podcasts, live interactive polling and quizzing, pedagogical aids (such
as Tumblr and Flickr), social media and the use of apps. I use a music clip, usually global and world music, on my first PowerPoint slide. I find that this helps to set the tone for the class; when the music ends, it is time to begin class. It also introduces students to music from other cultures. I use video clips embedded into my PowerPoints; some are episodes of television shows (such as a Coming Out episode when we discuss the process of coming out for LGBTQ individuals), documentaries, news episodes and YouTube videos. I use BlackBoard Learn to house all notes, support modules and assignments for students. I use interactive live polling platforms to gauge student learning. I find the use of technology makes course material interesting; however, I always provide support to my students who are unsure of technology and allow these students to turn in assignments in hard copy if they wish. In online and hybrid courses, I work hard to ensure students feel connected to the class and to me as the professor by including podcasts where I talk about the lectures, multimodal learning tools and interact with students on the forums regularly.

As a gatekeeper for the counseling and school psychology professions, I take my responsibilities to consumers, students and clients of clinical mental health counseling, school counseling and school psychology fields very seriously. I always make sure the content of my courses reflect the field and accreditation guidelines; I also ensure that all courses have a theoretical and practical basis and contain enough assessments that I feel confident when I assign a good grade that I am giving students my stamp of approval for that course’s content. I pay close attention to future validity indicators of students’ course performance as well: student’s performance on their comprehensive exams and licensure exams and their performance in field site settings. I review and adapt my courses every semester. Every few years, I make major course revisions in adapting new material and/or making more challenging assignments and lecture material.

I also take student feedback very seriously. When I am preparing a course, I review evaluations and student suggestions for the course and incorporate these improvements into the course. During a course, I evaluate student progress and ask for feedback on how well students understand concepts. If an individual student is struggling, I work with them outside of the class to help them get up to speed on the course material. However, if a larger group of students or the entire class is struggling, I feel that it is my responsibility to address the problem within a larger context. It is not necessarily a problem with my teaching, but sometimes a different cohort of students learns in different ways. For either possibility, it can only help my students for me to approach the concept that they are learning in a different way or scaffold more support for them in a certain assignment. I additionally provide students multiple opportunities to provide feedback on the book and readings assigned for the course. One example where I employed student feedback to make my teaching stronger has been the use of Reading Assessments. In my first few years as a teacher, I noticed that students were unprepared for the readings. One very honest student told me that if there was no assignment tied to the readings, she and most other students did not do the reading. I immediately created “reading assessments,”
which were questions in an assignment linked to the readings. Many students liked these as it helped them focus on specific things from the readings and gave them multiple opportunities to perform well on an assignment (rather than just a paper and an exam). However, I continued to get feedback from some students who felt that the reading assessments were “busy work”. A few years ago, I shifted my reading assessments to be fully applied. For example, in my Multicultural Counseling course, students do the reading, then read a case and apply the information they learned in the reading to the case. Therefore, they cannot just read the material, they need to absorb it and abstract the knowledge to respond to a practical field-related example. I have found that student understanding has increased; and students understand the context of the reading as it applies to their future profession.

I also regularly attend Counseling and Counselor Education Conferences where I bring back ideas into my teaching. At one of these conferences, I learned about new technology as well as exciting new ways to teach counseling skills. I immediately came back to teaching and employed the new technology. I always find myself invigorated after attending a conference; it is exciting to have new ideas on how to better reach students.

I feel that possibly my most important task is to be a mentor and role model for my students. Our accreditor (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs) actually has a standard related to the idea that our role as Counselor Educators is more than just an instructor; we are gatekeepers and mentors preparing professionals for service. In class and in these mentoring relationships, I attempt to teach my students how to network and make connections with others, increase their activity in the department and community, increase their field-related knowledge and skills, organization, self-care, motivation, empathy, patience and respect. I also teach them how to balance their personal lives with their responsibilities; for example, if a student needs an extension on an assignment deadline, they need to request such before the due date. If they do so, there is no late penalty. However, not staying in touch with me can result in 30% off of their grade if they turn in the assignment late.

Being a teacher is not only a job for me; It is my life’s calling. Teaching taps into both my analytical and cognitive side, as well as my creative personality. I feel invigorated after teaching; I never question my choice to become a Professor, to be a Counselor Educator and to work at Southern Connecticut State University. I enjoy the fact that I help my students progress in their education and professional lives. However, even more than that, I feel blessed to be influential in my students’ personal development. My goal is not only to assist my students to learn the class material; I also want them to be able to apply it to their lives in a positive and challenging way.

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1 Standard 1, U: The teaching and advising loads, scholarship, and service expectations of counselor education program faculty members are consistent with the institutional mission and the recognition that counselor preparation programs require extensive clinical instruction.