

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

A philosophy can be described as an amalgam of thoughts, concepts, and practices. In my opinion it should include, by default, the owner's beliefs, biases, and ignorance.

The best way to describe my philosophy on teaching is to provide the following analogy that relates how I feel about the process. Teaching for me is best described as an addiction. A chemical addict lives for the euphoria that comes along with drug use, but must suffer the inherent downside. I chose this career because I live professionally for that moment when a student synthesizes the information given to them in class and with facilitation from me comprehends the concept at hand. For a split second that student is a genius and I am the greatest teacher of all time. This moment is what makes being a teacher worthwhile to me. It is my professional high. However, as all teachers know, this doesn't occur everyday, sometimes not even every week. Like the drug addict, I suffer many lows between the euphoria. I must deal with disrespectful students that don't even have the discipline to show up for class on time, or at all. Students who make rude comments must be dealt with in class. Worst of all, the student who threatens to make me lose my commitment to teaching, is the student who doesn't care. I have been told many times not to worry about those students, but I do. Those students are teachable and reachable; I just don't yet have the abilities to get to them. Each one of the students that don't care represents a teaching 'high' that hasn't happened yet. So I press on, such efforts are the true trench work of teaching. However, the students are not always to blame. Not all of my lectures go as planned. For example, there are early mornings in the classroom following late nights of grant writing where I may not give the most coherent lecture. However, the vast majority of my teaching efforts are strong. I am also aware that I still have a lot to learn about teaching. If things go the way they should I will be putting that comment on my very last statement of teaching philosophy, whenever that day arrives. In a quest to reach all students I make several efforts.

First, I make an effort to attend as many teaching enhancement workshops as I can. There are always lessons and reflections that I can apply to my own teaching. I currently use five teaching tools I learned of at various teaching workshops in the last year in my courses including, methods for group evaluation, novel syllabi approaches, and Internet course systems.

Second, I try to present the complete picture of a given topic to my students. For example, when we talk about agriculture in my introductory plant science course we talk about large-scale conventional agriculture and small organic farms. This terrifies many of my 'Vermont' students who generally seem to despise corporate agriculture and more so, unsustainable agriculture. However, not all of them may stay in Vermont and they need to be aware of what is outside of the state. Furthermore, when I feel my own biases getting in the way I will invite experts to speak at opposite ends of the spectrum. Last year we covered a section on GMO crops in the principles of plant science course. I had two guest speakers on the topic, Dr. John Davis an Associate Professor of Forest Biotechnology at UF and David Zuckerman, organic farmer and VT State Representative. This year our topic was farm labor, so I brought in Mike Ballard who had lived and worked with migrant workers in Missouri. I could provide the stats, but I really needed Mike to put a human "face" on the numbers.

Third, I try to present up-to-date information that is relative to the students. The courses I am responsible for cover a very broad range of topics. As a result of this, I must continually read and research to keep my knowledge base current. I update lectures continuously. This also necessitates me stating clearly to the students at least once a week “I don’t know, but I will find out.” I follow up on all student questions that I can’t answer, which often leads to some of the best in-class discussions. I also present a lot of raw economic data. I refuse to tell students what they “want to hear” about salaries and job opportunities, instead I present the best data available from the USDA on the topic. I would rather arm them with the knowledge of the status of American Agriculture than send them out with false hopes. This information has the ability to empower students in the job market and business world. Although a small number of students have accused me of putting a “damper” on their aspirations, others have thanked me for giving them a realistic road map to reach those same goals.

Finally, I always make time for students. My research program necessitates that it be scheduled time rather than the ‘open door’ policy I would prefer, but I will make time for them. I will even meet (and have met) students as late as 8 pm and on weekends when necessary, due to work or family obligations. More moments of ‘genius’ happen during these office visits than happen in the classroom. I will answer any question a student has if asked sincerely. This includes matters outside of academia. Often though, more important than my answers, is the directions I send them in to look for information, advice, and assistance. I serve as a ‘guide’ to questioning students far more often than I serve as ‘professor.’

In summary, teaching is a ‘job’ that entails a lot of responsibilities and long hours of hard work. However, teaching in the moment when things come together for students, when they experience brilliance that I have facilitated in any small way, is exhilarating.