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Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy has evolved over 30 years of teaching, from working in K-12 schools and informal science education through the university setting in UVM's Environmental Program. Here I describe that philosophy in terms of elements of respect: for the role of the teacher, for students, for the teacher-student relationship, for the learning community, and for the course itself.

The teacher holds the central responsibility for the vitality of the learning community in the classroom. In that role, I respect the ongoing need to monitor student energy, my own energy, student response to the course material, my own passion and engagement in the field of study. I believe the teacher holds the steady center of the classroom, maintaining a through line of attention to the course content as well as to the student learners. This requires the cultivation of equanimity across the vagaries of weather, group chemistry, and semester stresses. I also feel it is important to avoid focusing attention on some students while ignoring others, whether this be based on gender, age, degree of verbal participation, or other characteristics. Instead, I consider it the teacher's role to create equalizing forms of interaction in the classroom which will engage the most students the most effectively. This requires preparation and flexibility, being ready to adjust techniques within a single class session or across the semester.

Respect for students is fundamental in my philosophy. I aim to treat each student with kindness, fairness, and genuine interest in their engagement with the course material. I do not allow "put downs" between students, or any other form of verbal or nonverbal degradation. I expect students to treat each other with respect as well. I often assign group projects and spend time discussing how students can work effectively together in groups through building basic trust and respect. Many students have had poor experiences working in groups, so we look at the common pitfalls as well as useful techniques for maintaining group cohesion and productivity.

The learning community is made up of the network of relations that sustain a particular course experience. This includes both the student-student relationships and the various teacher-student relations. I hold the teacher-student relation in very high regard as one of the primary archetypal human relationships. This feeling has been deeply influenced by my exposure to Zen Buddhism and its long history of teacher-student relations which have shaped various lineages and denominations. I am also strongly influenced by my father who has been a dedicated music educator for over 50 years. I regard each student as a unique whole person, formed of many experiences, geographies, relationships, and curiosities. I thoroughly enjoy the challenge and opportunity of meeting each student with full attention, whether to provide assistance in understanding, guidance for assignments, or academic mentoring. In my courses and interactions with students outside the classroom, I aim to encourage serious training for the development of life thinking skills. Throughout my teaching, I reinforce strong personal awareness of self and society as the context for learning.

As I experiment with ways to build community in the classroom, I find certain things crucial for generating respect and commitment to the community. This begins with attendance; I have clear attendance policies and use them to make the argument that in order to learn, you first must show up. If the course is stimulating and the learning community compelling, students usually feel they don't want to miss class. Students know I expect them to be there, and I want to know why when they are absent. I have consciously designed courses to build community, sometimes through special field trips (*Buddhism and Ecology*), sometimes through dinners or other social events, and also through group activities. In *Ecofeminism* I was very gratified when a new experiment in small book groups laid a

solid foundation for future group work. Within each individual class session, I work to include experiential exercises, different types of discussion groupings, or other ways to engage the learning community. I emphasize cooperative learning where possible, extending the spirit of community, for example, into open-book take-home exam preparation. I take it as a creative challenge to vary the teaching and learning styles in class while keeping up the learning pace across the semester.

Critical to the success of human interactions in learning is respect for the design and content of the course. I take great care in designing learning sequences in a syllabus, setting a rhythm that can generate student success. I first consider what must be taught to adequately represent the field of study (this is often a challenge in newly emerging areas of environmental studies). This requires a review of new literature in the field, particularly choices of books to use as texts. When I prepare a new course, this may mean reading 6-10 books to find the right combination of texts and selections for a reader. Then I develop challenging assignments which build skills in critical thinking, analysis, writing/rewriting, and speaking/presenting. I have been told my assignments are hard, but that students like the challenge and appreciate the careful structure I provide so they know when they are successful. I especially enjoy inventing new forms, as with the lab exercises I created for *Unlearning Consumerism*. I want students to respect the course content as a human endeavor, so I do my best to expose students to academic scholars in the field, engaged in stimulating intellectual work.

Most of my teaching could be called “values-based teaching”, especially my electives. By this I do not mean I use the course to promote my own values, but rather I design the course to help students articulate their own values, to examine and develop them in the context of their learning. I want to expose them to a diversity of values, cultural perspectives, and points of view, and encourage them to respect these different views as they define their own personal and intellectual values. I want them to see how values operate in decision-making, lifestyle choices, public policy, and environmental politics. I especially want students to feel confident enough in their values and understanding of course material to be able to give voice to them in social and political arenas. It is very important to me that what I teach in the classroom has direct relevance to the world students are experiencing. Their inquiries into modern values and worldviews keep the conversation evolving in a fresh way.

I love the creative challenges of teaching. Every class, every student, every semester presents new puzzles to solve, new possibilities for human bonding, new opportunities for enjoying the many dimensions of learning. By now I understand there are high and low points along the way; the rhythm of the semesters reflects all of life’s complexities for students and faculty both. It is very gratifying over time to see the long-term influence I have had on students, making my own life contribution to caring for this miraculous earth we call home.