

Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

My personal philosophy on teaching and learning is the product of a myriad of influences and has evolved over the years as the result of significant personal and professional experiences. In fact, this philosophy continues to take shape in response to my work as an Early Childhood Educator; a current centre Supervisor; as an Instructor at the post secondary level and as a student who, for nearly three decades, has maintained an intrinsic thirst for knowledge and has sought ongoing opportunities to commit to lifelong learning. It is with this experience in mind that I present my views on teaching and learning, all of which are capsulated in the following basic tenets:

First and foremost, **I believe that an effective teacher acknowledges that students possess individual strengths and needs that will ultimately influence their classroom experience and their response to the learning process.** Beyond mere acknowledgement, however, a good teacher also develops strategies for supporting a range of learning styles in order to meet the needs of all students. As proponents of this school of thought argue, effective teaching cannot be limited to the delivery of information; rather, it needs to be based on a “model of minds at work” (Anderson & Adams, 1992, p. 20). Thus, effective teaching can only be assured when an instructor affirms the presence and validity of diverse learning styles and maximizes the climate or conditions for learning in the classroom through the deliberate use of instructional design principles that take account of learning differences and increase the possibilities of success for all students (Anderson & Adams, 1992).

A commitment to flexible and responsive instruction is perhaps best demonstrated through my experience with Humber College and George Brown College, where I currently teach evening courses for part time students. Before making revisions to the Infant and Child Development and Social Justice courses I was assigned, for example, I recognized that the learning needs of continuing education students (many of whom had been out of formal schooling for years) presented some unique challenges as I endeavoured to deliver dense, theoretical content on a weekly basis. In conjunction with the gap in educational experience was the fact that many of these students were English Language Learners. Thus, the need to convey and reiterate largely abstract concepts in language that was accessible to all students was imperative. To do so, I employed a host of strategies, some of which included the assignment of reflection papers that required a connection to specific course concepts, and the grouping of students for projects and class discussions to provide opportunities for peer scaffolding to occur. I also created a variety of assessment procedures to maximize the students’ chances to succeed. Finally, I relied upon a multitude of approaches to content delivery (e.g. Power Point lectures; videos; in-class assignments; guest speakers) as a means of ensuring that key course concepts were conveyed in a manner that was consistent with the learning styles of all students.

As it is widely recognized that one of the main tasks of an effective teacher is to inculcate in their students a disposition toward lifelong learning, this responsibility also serves as one of the cornerstones of my philosophy of teaching and learning. In fact, Christopher Day (1999) argues that it is essential that teachers actively demonstrate this commitment and, in so doing, routinely review and renew their own knowledge and skills. Thus, **a good teacher makes a steadfast commitment to lifelong learning themselves.** Similar to this ideology is the belief that **that approaches to teaching should reflect ‘best practices’ in the field and should always be premised upon current research.** My dedication to this principle is substantiated, in part, by the academic experiences I’ve acquired to date. In addition to completing an undergraduate and graduate degree in Early Childhood Education, I recently applied to two PhD programs at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (affiliated with the University of Toronto) for Fall 2011. Both applications were made to support my avid interest in social justice and curriculum/teacher development. In addition to formal schooling, I also keep abreast of current research and professional trends through ongoing participation in various conferences across the country, where I am often invited to speak on issues pertinent to the field. Moreover, I welcome opportunities to publish (where possible) in connection with my research interest in inclusion and diversity. To

date, I've authored an article and resource manual related to the need to support queer issues in the early childhood classroom.

A third premise central to my philosophy of teaching and learning is the belief that both **teachers and learners should be critically reflective** – of the content to which they are exposed, as well as of their personal ideologies, values, and beliefs that may influence the teaching/learning process. Critical self-reflection (or transformative learning as it is also called), involves a willingness to evaluate one's own thinking and the related impact that these thoughts may have on one's practice (Mezirow, 1998). It is the ability to call into question core principles that ground discussions that transpire in the classroom and our personal reactions to these conversations. It is a process that, if done deliberately and intentionally, may ultimately result in significant personal or social transformation (Brown, 2006).

As I have a fervent interest in self betterment, I make a concerted effort to seek feedback related to my approach to teaching on a consistent basis. Aiding this process is a repertoire of strategies that I employ to ensure that this approach meets the needs of all students. For example, I routinely check in with the group during lectures and at various intervals throughout the semester to ensure that I am teaching at a pace that is respectful to all learners. In addition, I implement a "STOP, START, CONTINUE" exercise with the students I teach (as well as with the frontline staff I supervise at Macaulay Child Development Centre) to elicit more specific feedback regarding my teaching strengths and those areas that may require improvement. To encourage self reflection among students, I ask that they explore their reactions to course content through journal entries and through formal writing assignments that follow the "RETELL, RELATE, REFLECT" format. This particular tool for self reflection has proven especially valuable for students enrolled in the Social Justice course as many of the topics discussed can elicit strong and deeply personal feelings and attitudes towards the multiple forms of diversity that characterize contemporary Canadian society.

Another premise that is evident in my approach to teaching and learning relates to the reciprocity of the teaching/learning process itself. In other words, **I believe that I have as much to learn from students as they do from me.** Underpinning this belief is a genuine respect for students' funds of knowledge. Simply stated, this type of knowledge refers to "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of information and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Gonzalez & Amanti, 2005, p. 133) that ultimately shape students' responses toward and interpretations of classroom content. According to Lopez (n.d.), "when [educators] shed their role of 'teacher' and 'expert' and, instead, take on a new role as 'learner', they can come to know their students...in new and distinct ways". Thus, to embrace multiple funds of knowledge is to make room for multiple interpretations of the world in the classroom. It is also an acknowledgement of one's prior experience and the influence this has on the learning process. Put into practice, it also entails a concerted effort to allow students to make sense of the content to which they are exposed from personal perspectives shaped by other agents of socialization (including family and culture).

I welcome the opportunity to view the topics I am required to teach through the eyes of the students themselves and have found that I, too, learn something in this process. For example, when teaching Infant and Child development, it is interesting to hear how culture shapes our understanding of developmental norms and, so, I encourage students to share child rearing practices or understandings of children/childhood that differ from those typically presented in course resources. Also, having recognized that many of the students in my courses bring with them a wealth of practical knowledge to the classroom due, in large part, to their frontline work in the field of early childhood education, I routinely provide opportunities for them to connect theory with practice to help them make sense of otherwise abstract concepts. This is done mainly through small group and class discussions and, more formally, through class projects, in-class assignments and module tests.

A final principle that is essential to my philosophy of teaching and learning is the belief that **curriculum should (wherever possible) inspire a commitment to social justice.** Attention to social justice issues in the

classroom incorporates a broad range of sociological dimensions in teaching, and education more generally, including attention to fairness and equity with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, and other key components of identity that result in the systemic oppression of non-dominant groups (Kohl, 1998). At the pre-service training level, a commitment to shaping socially just teaching practice means providing students with opportunities to connect classroom content to real world issues. For example, when discussing the impending implementation of full day early learning for 4- and 5-year-olds in Ontario and the new Early Learning-Kindergarten Program curriculum document, the students in my Curriculum Theory course were invited to reflect upon the way in which Ontario's First Nations children would not have access to this provincial initiative (as the education of Canada's Aboriginal population is a federal responsibility). Similarly, in examination of the current state of early childhood education and care in this country, students who take my Policy, Advocacy and Legislation class investigate the absence of a universal system of service access and delivery, which serves to disadvantage, in particular, children and families from marginalized backgrounds.

As I continue to acquire experience teaching at the post secondary level and as I work toward the completion of my doctoral studies, it is inevitable that my philosophy of teaching and learning will evolve. In the meantime, however, I am confident that a commitment to the core values expressed above will translate into learning experiences that inspire a passion for instilling in children, the same values I seek to impart upon future educators. It is with this in mind that I move forward, excited about the opportunity to grow – both personally and professionally – and as I remain focused on the journey that lies ahead, I am thrilled by the prospect of discovering within, a deepened understanding of myself as both a teacher and a learner!

References

- Anderson, J. & Adams, M. (1992). Acknowledging the learning styles of diverse student populations: Implications for instructional design. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1992(49), 19 – 33.
- Kohl, H. (1998). Teaching for social justice. In Ayers, W., Hunt, J.A., & Quinn, T. (Eds.). *Teaching for social justice: A democracy and education reader* (pp. 67 – 86). New York: The New Press.
- Brown, K.M. (2006). Leadership for social justice and equity: Evaluating a transformative framework and andragogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(5), 700 – 745.
- Day, C. (1999). *Developing teachers: The challenges of lifelong learning*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer Inc.
- Gonzalez, N., Moll L. & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households communities and classrooms*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lopez, J. (n.d.). *Funds of knowledge: Bridging Spanish language barriers in Southern schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/brdglangbarriers/939> on November 28, 2010.
- Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection: *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), 185 – 198.