

## Development of One's Teaching Philosophy: The Three "R's" of Relationships, Relevancy, and Rigor

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# Development of One's Teaching Philosophy: The Three "R's" of Relationships, Relevancy, and Rigor

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## Introduction

A teaching philosophy is a personal narrative reflecting an individual's beliefs about teaching and learning through concrete examples of teaching strategies. There can be many purposes for writing a teaching philosophy. For example, faculty may want to explain to students, peers, and/or others their teaching beliefs and practices to support how they deliver content in the classroom. It may also serve as a professional growth opportunity, as faculty reflect on their personal teaching practices with others as a way to mentor peers. Since a philosophy is a work in progress due to changes in teaching practices and professional identities, faculty should expect a philosophy to change throughout their teaching career.

Developing one's teaching philosophy (or teaching statement) is becoming more common for academic faculty. This may help them develop into more thought-provoking and reflective practitioners which is critical for becoming better educators. This philosophy often makes their implicit views on teaching and student learning explicit as they showcase what, why, and how they teach.

Since every academic discipline and academic environment is unique in various manners, teaching philosophies may appear uniquely different from one another. When developing a teaching philosophy, several steps are involved. First, faculty should generate their own ideas, values, and assumptions about teaching and learning related to their own culture and academic world. Next, faculty should organize those ideas and assure specific examples of classroom practices are emphasized and used to accentuate the teaching philosophy in practice. As teaching practices unfold, faculty should assess and evaluate how their ideas and strategies work, or not work, thus leading to transformational changes in their teaching practices. This narrative describes one faculty member's teaching philosophy, specifically how she identified what was occurring and what she found helped with her students' needs and desires in the classroom.

## Teaching Philosophy Narrative

For the past 18 years, I have taught both undergraduate and graduate courses in an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program at a land-grant university. My classes have ranged from completely face-to-face, blended/hybrid, to fully online, with enrollments ranging from 10 to 75 students. My teaching philosophy derives from various developmental theorists, including Bronfenbrenner, Dewey, Gardner, and Vygotsky. More specifically, these theorists emphasize the need to learn by doing, to reconstruct one's own thinking during the course of his/her life, to identify that human development is influenced by differing types of environmental systems as well as social interaction, and finally to identify that social interaction and engagement precedes development (Mooney, 2013). Gardner defined specific intelligences as capacities to process a

certain kind of information that originated in human biology (Gardner, 2006). I believe every student comes to me with unique abilities, intelligences, talents, values, knowledge bases, and interests because of their past experiences and genetics. My teaching strategies and learning activities attempt to focus on these theories and students' unique differences as well as similarities, showcasing how we all interrelate with one another as a learning community yet in differing ways. I value relationships, collaboration, diversity, respect, wonder, courage, compassion, understanding, and a love for learning. My students not only come to me with a wide range of abilities and knowledge bases but also with a wide range of needs. To address needs, I create an open-ended survey at the beginning, middle and end of each semester for all my courses, asking about my teaching as well as questions or comments they have about the course content, the university, and/or life in general.

Throughout my teaching career, I have been asked to develop a teaching philosophy for various reasons, my teaching portfolio, promotion and tenure needs, teaching/scholarly award nominations, and for my faculty annual review. Being a teacher, I found this to be very befitting, knowing my philosophy would impact my future and make me a more reflective practitioner. As someone who also believes in inquiry-based learning, I viewed this reflective document as a catalyst to better myself, by leading me to understand what I intended or wanted through asking questions and finding the answers by analyzing my teaching practice. As time progressed, though, I continually questioned if what I was doing in my classroom really worked?

After receiving a few teaching awards, presenting for the university at various levels about teaching, and through word of mouth, other colleagues from around campus wanted to know more about my teaching, both in the classroom and online. I invited these colleagues to join my classes, both face-to-face and on our online management system, so they could visually see what I was doing, as I was having difficulties explaining my thought-processes and strategies myself. As years progressed, I realized I needed to critically analyze what I was specifically doing within my classrooms, which led me to collect and analyze various data sources. My data consisted of various students, peers, and university colleagues' anecdotal notes and observations about my teaching, students' assignments, numerous formal and informal student evaluations, and formal and informal discussions about my teaching practices, ideas, and beliefs with my students, my departmental head, and my dad, who previously taught at a land-grant university for over 30 years. I also reviewed material and information I had read throughout the years that provided me with a context on how to enhance my scholarly work on teaching and learning, specifically Hattie (2009), Hill, Stremmel, Fu (2005), MacLean & Mohr (1999), Palmer (2007) van Manen (1991), and Weimer (2006).

Although I didn't have concrete evidence, other than formal and informal evaluations and past assignments, for the beginning of my teaching career, I came to realize students left my classes with a basic understanding of the course material, yet they didn't know who to apply, analyze, evaluate or synthesis the information. Students didn't question what was presented to them. They took notes and asked about what they "needed to know" for the assignments and exams in order to get the grade they desired.

I also realized early in my teaching career that I wasn't identifying the broader picture. I was focusing so much on the minor details such as class attendance, my energy level, and/or students' daily nonverbal cues, I was not reflecting on the broader themes within my own teaching philosophy. Although these details assisted with classroom motivation, accountability, responsibility, and learning, I didn't recognize the bigger "elephant in the room" , so-to-speak. What became evident through the data was that I needed to focus on 3 main themes to keep my students energized, wanting to know more and obtaining higher levels of thinking while still learning about their upcoming profession and the teaching world overall, the 3 "R's" . I opted to

use minimal, yet critical teaching strategies I had written about in my own teaching philosophy: **relationships** (creating and fostering a positive learning environment), **relevancy** (establishing the relevance and application of course material), and **rigor** (establishing and implementing high expectations to move and challenge others' thoughts). I found these unique traits should not only be listed in alphabetical order, but also be emphasized in this order to create a successful classroom learning environment.

### **Relationships**

Research has shown that connecting with others may be the most important thing one does in life along with establishing a safe and comfortable environment (Thapa, Cohen, Higgins-D'Alessandro, & Guffey, 2012). Dewey's theory specifically mentions that teaching is based on a pedagogy of relationships (Hill, Stremmel, & Fu, 2005). Positive rapport between individuals not only increases feelings of being valued but also increases an individual's willingness to challenge their thinking (Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence, 2012). Healthy relationships matter as they help individuals live happier, healthier, and longer lives by strengthening senses of purpose and happiness, reducing depression, increasing levels of overall life satisfaction, and providing successful coping mechanisms of external stressors (Harvard Medical Center, 2016). Relationships also matter because they shape individuals through behaviors and beliefs. I found this to be true of myself and my students. In order to develop healthy relationships, I needed to first identify the objectives of our relationships the first day of class. Stating the reasons why I wanted a relationship with them was crucial as students understood my purpose for being there. I wasn't just a teacher, I was someone who cared about them as individuals and about their professional lives. I wanted them to succeed both academically and in life by providing them with information not only about class content, but about potential resources to answer their questions about university life; program entry, scholarship requirements, professional etiquette, and more. I empathized with them, both inside and outside of the classroom. Our relationships were also built on who they were and who I was as their teacher. I didn't wait for them to come to me with questions and/or problems but rather began by asking them questions about who they were, where they came from, what their values and beliefs were, etc. while also describing my own. As the courses progressed, I supported our relationships by writing comments on assignments and/or speaking highly about what they had accomplished, who they were as individuals, and/or providing them with thought-provoking questions about themselves, questions they might not have considered. I spoke with compassion and kindness when problems arose and was honest with students from the start so that their academic performance and dispositions did not have a chance to turn into larger issues later on. Students knew I was there to help them as I listened intently to their desires, dreams, ideas, and needs. We built unique relationships together as a group of learners. The classroom environment was student-centered and provided them with various learning strategies to help them all succeed.

### **Relevancy**

The second theme within my work was that of relevancy. I define relevancy much the same as Roberson (2013); the perception that something is interesting and worth knowing for future use. Relevance is important to teaching and learning because it is directly related to student engagement and motivation (Frymier & Schulman, 1995; Martin & Dowson, 2009). Upon entering my classroom, students usually understood the primary reason why that specific course was required, yet, had difficulties understanding its relevancy. They asked questions such as, "Why do I need to know this? How is this going to benefit me? Do I really need to know this? I've already had experience in this. Or, I don't plan to teach this age range, so why do I have to take this

class?" , and the most prevalent question of all, "How will this apply to me?" My responsibility was to extend the information I was providing to students and help them "build bridges" , per se, between theory and application. Students needed relevancy between the course content, activities, and how it would relate to them later in life in order for the content to make sense and "matter" . I first saw the need for relevancy within my course objectives and learning outcomes on the course syllabus. Students needed to understand what the course would entail along with what would be expected of them and the reasoning behind those expectations. When I tied the assignments to the learning outcomes specifically, students understood the purpose behind each assignment and it made me reflect back on the importance of each assignment as well. Next, within my classroom lectures and learning activities I usually asked three basic questions: What? Why? and How? These questions not only motivated the students but put the content and activities into appropriate context. However, they still needed help connecting to the value, purpose, and procedures for what I was doing that day in class. I also used various teaching strategies such as discussions, apps from the web, video clips, case scenarios, guest speakers, narrated lectures, small group work and others, but to a minimal degree so not to overwhelm students. These strategies not only helped with keeping students engaged, but also provided relevancy as the teaching tools could easily be adapted and applied to the students' future classrooms as educators. The content was substantive and well explained which not only drew in the students' attention but held it there throughout the class period. I not only proved the value for the topic, but the relatedness the content to students lives. Third, upon meeting my husband, who farms, he said the best teacher he encountered was a math teacher who had previously lived on the farm during her childhood. She put all story problems into farm-related scenarios so that he could understand the relevancy to why those type of story problems were needed and how to solve them. He better understood what math was about, how to use it effectively, and the relationship it would have on him later in life. It moved him to higher thinking levels than just remembering and understanding the material. He applied, analyzed, and synthesized the information, strategies I hoped to instill in my courses. Based on his explanation and thoughts, I found that my own experiences also contributed a large portion to helping students understand the importance of the topic. I shared my strengths, my struggles, my choices, and my aspirations. I also thought about how I learn best and how others do, and then created the various teaching strategies mentioned earlier to assure students were learning in their preferred manner as well. The past and the present have made a profound impact on who I was and who I was to become, ideologies I hoped students would realize as well. Based on these various relevancy components, students came away with statements such as, "I see why this is important for me to know." "I know when I get into my job setting, I will use what I have learned time and time again. I didn't realize that until now." "My past experiences in school and home shaped me who I am today, but I also realize that what I am learning and doing right now will also make a big impact later on."

### **Rigor**

The last "R" found was that of rigor, which is often interrelated with relevancy and relationships, and is on the forefront of countless debates on how to appropriately define it. Rigor, in my eyes, refers to creating high expectations and a quality learning environment where students use their knowledge to create meaning for a broader purpose. I also believe rigor encompasses accountability and responsibility on both the faculty and the students. Rigor requires active participation from not only the students but the instructor as well. Rigor requires students to not only learn the foundational knowledge of the content area, but to apply it to real-world situations and understand how to refocus if strategies or ideas do not work the first time. Providing the right kind of support and resources was essential if I wanted students to move forward in their

thinking. When developing lessons and articulating various components within class, I provided a framework where students asked deeper, more thought-provoking, and problem solving-based questions. In addition, I helped them see the various connections within the information through demonstrations, experiences, and activities, to think about issues and problems at different levels, ones that may not have considered or even questioned. I also wanted students to see their unique value and potential by encouraging them to think critically and evaluate from multiple perspectives. When students didn't know the answers to my questions, I continued to probe and guide them so they better understood what I was asking, having them answer the question presented, rather than moving on to the next individual who may have known the answer. I utilized both pedagogy and andragogy principles and methods to allow the students to discover things for themselves, yet was there for them, providing guidance and helping when mistakes were made.

Others may view rigor as assuring an average, or bell shaped curve is established in class, portraying the majority of students achieved C grades, while very few achieved A and F grades. Although this would show the majority of students achieved basic skills, while other outperformed or didn't perform up to standards, it didn't necessarily demonstrate the rigor of my overall classroom environment. In my eyes, grades do not always necessarily demonstrate one's knowledge. What grades often do demonstrate is showcasing one's ability to perform on certain assessments. I tried to establish a supportive environment where students were expected to showcase their learning through various tasks, not necessarily on graded items. I held students accountable for demonstrating their understanding by using more discussions, reflective short-answer essays, and face-to-face conversations rather than always using graded exams and assignments. There were clear structures to the discussions and information, both of which were applicable to more than one context and yet were meaningful for them as individuals. Since society has trained us to think in behaviorist manners such as, "What is in it for me?" "What do I get in return, if I do this for you?" , it can be very difficult for individuals to change their ways of asking such questions instead, "How can I help myself become a better person?" "How can I help others become better people?" "What can I do to help society convert to a better, more productive civilization?" I felt I had done a disservice if my students left my classroom unprepared to succeed in society, especially in the realm of early childhood education. Using Bloom's Taxonomy for assessment purposes helped examine students' learning on multiple levels (Bloom, Englehart, Fust, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). I had to question myself, "Are my students becoming better people all around? How can I help them get to the next level of learning?"

### **Conclusions**

Although this narrative inquiry constitutes my personal accounts, ideas, and philosophy of teaching, I know the inevitable 3 "R's" I found within my own teaching arise within many other classrooms, both online and face-to-face, on a daily basis. What I discovered within my own teaching is that specific styles, strategies, and activities may assist with classroom motivation, engagement, and learning, they do not necessarily lend to higher thinking strategies. These items also do not necessarily lend themselves to developing secure and trusting relationships that can be used to build and support one another both social-emotionally and cognitively. Students must not only learn, do, and reflect within classroom environments and in life, but they must also develop critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, creativity, and collaboration and adaptation skills. They must also be willing to take initiative at times, provide effective written and oral communication techniques to accentuate their ideas and thoughts, and finally, they need to continue their curiosity about the world around them. Although others may find flaws within my teaching philosophy, it is one I will hold onto and adapt as I progress in my teaching career.

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