Philosophy of Teaching

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My philosophy of teaching is deeply rooted in the way that I was taught. I have spent many more years in the classroom as a student than I have as an instructor. I believe that drawing on these experiences as a student makes me an effective teacher. Specifically, there are teachers, mentors really, who taught me, not only the academic material needed, but also what makes a teacher great.

My second grade teacher, Ms. Briscoe, taught me how important it is to develop relationships with my students. As a second grader, I would have said that I loved Ms. Briscoe because she was pretty and nice. Now I know that, although she was both, what I really loved about Ms. Briscoe was that she made me feel special. She did this for me, and all her students, by creating personal relationships, praising us when we did well, and encouraging us when we needed it. Ms. Briscoe had a class of 25 students for an entire year. As a college instructor, I have at least 100 students each semester. My methods for reaching students are different but the outcome is the same. I learn all of my students names, letting them know that they are not just anonymous faces in a crowd. I try to create a casual and comfortable learning environment because I want my students to feel free to ask questions during lectures and to come to me for help.

In high school, my A.P. Literature teacher was Catherine Bockmier. What made Catherine a terrific instructor was that she challenged me to think analytically. She showed me how important it is to think about what I am reading, not to merely read the book. Although the material from her literature class is very different from the math I teach, both disciplines require the ability to look beyond what is written in order to understand fully the underlying concepts and to substantiate conclusions with evidence. In math, many students try simply to memorize the way a particular problem is done without really understanding what they are doing. Because math is cumulative and many of my students will be taking additional math classes, it is important to me that they truly understand the concepts. For example, in my statistics classes, I expect my students to calculate the standard deviation of a sample. I also expect them to be able to explain what the standard deviation represents. In lectures, we look at how formulas are derived and what the results represent. My students are tested, not only on their calculations, but also on their interpretation of these values. This approach is especially important in the courses for elementary education majors. They all know how to borrow when subtracting. They do it without even thinking about it. However, it is important for these future teachers to know what it really means to borrow. To make these students think about what is involved in addition and subtraction in our base 10 system, I teach them about base 5 addition and subtraction. I have them do an in-class project using base 5 blocks. The students often get frustrated learning a new base, but many of them tell me that doing so helped them understand what their students will be encountering.

As an undergraduate, I took many math classes with Dr. Ed Sakurai. Ed contributed to my teaching philosophy by showing me the importance of group learning, as well as the concept of frequent evaluation. Ed encouraged us to work together. We were given time during class to practice. When I
began teaching, although I provided my students with examples, I repeatedly had students come to me, frustrated because they easily understood what I did on the board but once they were at home working problems, they suddenly realized it was not as easy. Initially, I tried to rectify this deficiency by providing more examples during lectures. Soon I realized that I could do examples on the board until my hands ached, but until they actually worked the problems themselves, my students would not really understand the material. I also saw that students become frustrated working problems at home without immediate feedback or help. I often incorporate practice problems and group worksheets into my classes. Although I am there to help, often working with their classmates provides students with the ability to come to the solutions themselves. To make sure that my students are keeping up with and understanding the material, I give frequent short quizzes. This is something that Ed did. From my own experience, I know that these frequent evaluations forced me to keep up with the material instead of trying to learn it all the day before an exam.

Finally, my philosophy of teaching was influenced by, Dr. Blyth, my graduate school algebra professor. Dr. Blyth was extremely organized and gave very clear and understandable lecture notes. Although we were encouraged to read along in the text, often I found my notes from class were much more concise. I had many math professors who gave scattered and incomplete lecture notes, which required that I pour over the text trying to make some sense of what I’d written down in class. With my notes from Dr. Blyth, I could easily understand the material covered in class and use my textbook as a reference. My lecture style is modeled after Dr. Blyth’s and my students definitely respond to this method. My evaluations consistently show that my students like the way I present material in class. They say that my lectures are very well organized and understandable.

My mentors have successfully taught me academic content as well as methods. However, as I get older, and the students I am teaching are born more recently, I have found it necessary to go outside of my own learning experience to reach these students. Frequently they have vastly different cultural and educational experiences than my own. Most of the students that I teach today were born AFTER the advent of the internet. My generation, and those before me, studied in the library and scoured actual textbooks for the answers we needed. Students today have an immense amount of information available, all at the touch of a computer keyboard. They are technologically savvy. They have become accustomed to instant information, immediate gratification and the ability to communicate with a large number of people on-the-spot through e-mail, messaging, and texting. It stands to reason that if their life experiences are so different than mine, their educational experiences will also have to be. Although I may have been skeptical at first, I firmly believe that the way to reach students today is by embracing the technology and reaching them via the methods they understand. Homework and reference can be found on-line with instant results and evaluation. Interaction with students does not need to be limited to the classroom. In the upcoming months I will be utilizing a grant I received with a colleague to create on-line “math movies” for College Algebra students. The key to being a good teacher is in one’s ability to reach his or her students by whatever means necessary. It is important to be able to adapt to changes in students. Therefore, I utilize the methods I learned from, as well as new methods based on developing technology, to make sure that I stay connected to my students and continue to help them learn.