

Devin Thornburg
School of Education

Teaching Philosophy

Any teaching philosophy, it seems to me, should begin with and build upon one's deeply-felt beliefs about the human condition. I have always sought to create relationships built on trust and deep learning. I believe that all people learn every moment of their lives and that it is up to teachers to determine what they are learning, how they are learning, and to build from there. I believe that teachers must be learners, themselves. And finally, I believe that we must have integrity and humility about everything that we do; to accept one's frailty and to face it. Because of these beliefs, I attempt to create an intellectual atmosphere of open inquiry, honest dialogue, and collaboration in the learning process.

There are several critical elements that I would consider to be part of the extant literature on "best practices" in teaching that I attempt to model and implement in my classrooms, listed below:

- 1) Multiple modes for learning—I believe that teachers have a responsibility to use methods and teaching aids that reflect students' learning "outside" of the classroom. I use media and film to illustrate content and technology as a tool for learning, ranging from student research for data on the internet, to use of smartboards for instruction (this semester, for example, in an offsite course in a Queens high school for educational leadership students), to judicious use (and student production) of power point presentations, and to online discussion boards.
- 2) Group learning—I use group work extensively, both for instructional purposes as well as for student assignments (hopefully, in balance with individual learning). I believe that students learn a great deal more from one another than from whole class instruction, depending on the objectives of the lesson, whether it be in the form of informal discussions about text, debates, Socratic circles, or group projects involving research.
- 3) Authentic projects—Perhaps an overused (and for some, outdated) term, assignments that can be used in a meaningful way outside of the classroom are central to my coursework. While the skills involved in objective tests or term papers are important, they can be integrated into larger and more complex works that are developed over time. This is more obviously relevant to graduate professional education, such as the development of a program and grant application to support at-risk students in a school or a model of an ideal classroom that reflects one's own philosophy. But undergraduate courses can also involve authentic work when they are directly connected to students' interests. Examples of this have involved delivering a lesson to peers from one's

own major in an orientation teacher education class or developing a project for a local community that addresses violence prevention.

- 4) Developmental approaches to course assignments—I believe that students often understand the benefit of content or skills knowledge when they are integrated within a larger, meaningful project as described above. These projects are typically developed over a series of weeks with different sections assigned over the semester that are submitted for my feedback. In other cases, short assignments are required that can be revised with my responses to the student's draft. While these approaches do not address all required assignments in my courses (performance-based assessments such as debates or in-class written examinations), I attempt to design a variety of assessments including those that are more developmental in scope. There are many reasons for doing so, but the opportunity for reflection and a sense of mastery over course material are two.
- 5) Field experiences—Whenever possible, I have included a field-based assignment as a requirement of my courses. Ultimately, this is the best way for students to see the connections (or lack of them) between theory and practice as well as an opportunity to reflect on their experiences through integration of the course material. There are many examples that you will note in the submitted portfolio of my work but the most noteworthy one (in terms of the amount of time, effort, and complexity) has been a service-learning project in the community that has emerged out of the Levermore Global Scholars' program. Last year, this involved a curriculum-based intervention in teaching about conflict and self-concept in an elementary school in Hempstead; this year, it was much more involved in having the Global Scholar students meet with groups of middle school students about violence in the community and creating peace projects in an after-school project run by Family and Children's Services in Hempstead. The latter project has resulted in a full-blown community service course that I am teaching this semester with former and new students for the Levermore program. These experiences are always related back to the course curriculum with structured reflections, in writing, required.

With regard to the integration of my scholarship and research into my courses, I am in the enviable position of having the field-based research and professional support that I conduct in schools as a central part of each course that I teach (whether it is a course I have designed for one of the education programs or one that has already been established). I have, for over twenty years, worked in schools to support teacher professional and program development to enhance the academic and social success of diverse populations of children. While there has been considerable variety in what that support has entailed in terms of curriculum (including conflict resolution, self-concept enhancement, use of reflective inquiry, authentic assessment and group work in classrooms, and program development/grants writing for schools). Most of my publications and scholarly presentations have revolved around these issues with culturally and linguistically diverse children. Most recently,

this has been focused on a social emotional learning framework which I cover in both the undergraduate and graduate courses that I teach.

The undergraduate courses over the last three semesters have involved two: The Scholar Teacher Education Program (STEP) Orientation Seminar and the Levermore Global Scholars Freshmen Seminar which I designed, Children Peace and Violence. As you can see from the syllabi, I address the topics of social justice in education, conflict resolution/violence prevention in schools, and reflective inquiry in these classes—all of which are part of my research in schools. The graduate courses have been Families, Culture and Learning in the Special Education program as well as two courses that I created for the STEP students in their fifth year of study, Life in Classrooms, and Diversity, Community and Leadership for the Educational Leadership program. The Families course involves content that is directly connected to my work with schools supporting English Language Learners and their families, as well as cultural differences in learning and behavior. Life in Classrooms addresses many of the strategies that I have found to be responsive to the needs of diverse learners in my research (e.g. differentiated instruction, group work, and authentic assessment strategies). And the Diversity, Community and Leadership course was drawn liberally from the programs and interventions I designed and researched when I was Director of the Metro Center at NYU, a non-profit arm of the School that sought to support underrepresented populations and low-performing schools.