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Teaching Philosophy

To paraphrase Thomas Edison, I believe that good teaching is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, plus a healthy dose of enthusiasm.

1. Perspiration

A. Getting to Know the Student

I make a great effort to get to know my students' names, interests, where they work, activities, responsibilities, and aspirations. This also sends them the message that I am interested in them as people. Students who are older, especially ones with children, students from other cultures, and students with unusual interests or experiences can all be helpful in getting across ideas to other students.

B. Be Tough, But Consistent

I take attendance in every class, and do not accept lame excuses. If a student is late, even just a little, it costs half a cut. I tell them, "if you can get here at 9:30, you can get here at 9:25." I insist that deadlines be met, and I am proud that for the last several years I have had no incompletes. If excuses are valid, or if a student has real problems, I try to be compassionate and helpful. Thank goodness we got back the Student Counseling Center.

I am equally tough on myself. For example, last semester I had two sections of Western Civ, with a total of 75 students. Since each student has to write eight papers, I graded about 600 papers in those two classes alone. With very few exceptions, the papers are returned graded and with comments in the next class. I believe quick feedback is essential for the improvement of student writing and thinking.

C. Accessibility

I try to be as accessible as possible to students. I keep office hours scrupulously and am available by appointment. My students have my home phone number, and I leave it on my office voice mail message.

D. Advisement

Along with the FC RTP I consider advisement to be an important element of teaching. For many years I have been Adelphi's prelaw advisor. The Provost's Office has copies of my annual reports. I also advise history majors and undecideds. It is crucial to take the necessary time with each student and to tailor a program to their needs. This process is very time-intensive, and not just during preregistration.

E. Mastery of Basic Factual Material

As you can see on my appended syllabi, for all but Senior Seminar, in every class meeting I require students to come in with a page of important factual information. I collect and grade them about one fourth of the time, randomly selected. Part of the exams are devoted to this factual material. In my European History classes, I require a rigorous map assignment.

2. Inspiration

I believe that the single most important quality to develop in students is the ability to think in a nuanced and critical way. In every course I teach, part of the first class is devoted to a discussion of the propaganda chapter in Hitler's Mein Kampf, which makes the uncomfortable but true assertion that most people are seducible by simplistic slogans, endlessly repeated. I ask them rhetorically if they want to be among the sheep.

Teaching critical thinking is more easily said than done. To reach typical suburban college students requires varied and concrete metaphors, sources with conflicting views and, sometimes, provocative leadership in class discussions and lectures. As an example, in learning the American Revolution, my students read background on its origins, plus the Declaration of Independence. The latter is well known to them, and accepted with blind faith. I pretend to be George III, with the students as a delegation of rebellious colonists. I rip the document apart, and force them to defend it, and thereby make them reexamine previously facile assumptions.

Another example, which I shamelessly borrowed from Lou Starkey, is to divide the class into Christians, prosecutors, and a Roman jury, with me as judge. We try the Christians for treason for refusing to burn incense to the emperor. Given Roman law, the jury usually convicts, and then I have the devilish fun of offering pardon from death for students who recant.

In our department's Senior Seminar, required for all History majors, students have to do a 25-30 page paper based mostly on original sources. I also require that all students provide a substantial written critique of the other papers, and that they publicly defend their own paper. This process teaches them both how to dish out criticism and how to take it. When I do the course, 50% of their grade is based on their criticisms and their defense.

Another key element in understanding history is to try to lift students from their pop culture haze and to see the world through the eyes and values of other times and cultures. At the beginning they implicitly assume people in the past thought like they do. It is therefore challenging to get them to see the world through the eyes of a salvation-obsessed medieval monk, or of an 18th century French peasant terrified of change in her customary world.

Hindsight is easy to develop; contemporary sight is harder, particularly about such disturbing questions as why decent people, like my students and their parents, if transferred to depression-era Germany, might well support an up-and-

coming politician who was a war hero. Such teaching can even raise ethical questions. One has to make Nazism attractive enough so students can understand its contemporary appeal, but not so enticing that parts of it might appeal to them now. They need to understand how attractive and seductive evil can be. I even wrote an article once about this dilemma (“Striving for Balance in an Unbalanced Ideology”, in Warren Martin (ed.), New Perspectives in Teaching and Learning, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1981).

To teach successfully in this manner demands endless effort, both to keep up on scholarship in a number of areas, and to keep reinventing the kinds of vivid metaphors which an ever-changing student body can comprehend.

On the whole, I must say that most aspects of teaching are so much fun for me that sometimes I feel a little guilty getting my paycheck. To spend most of my life teaching students and reading books is for me a dream come true.