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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I believe that any student can be motivated to learn. With the teacher as the motivating force, students can learn even the most difficult of concepts. Learning is accomplished most effectively in an open and comfortable environment, in which students are encouraged to share their ideas, feelings, and intellectual arguments. Inviting students to speak out, express their thoughts, and debate various issues, involves them in dialogues that add memorable impact to the learning experience.

I favor the Socratic method of teaching. I want students to arrive at answers by thinking through the material presented to them. A teacher should inform the students and guide them to ask the right questions. In this way, students develop their own logical arguments, which leads them to “discover” the answers through the process of thought rather than being told what is correct.

While many weighty issues must be pursued in the social sciences, I believe that humor, when applicable, reinforces the learning process. It helps to foster a more student-friendly learning environment and imparts a positive “feel” within the classroom. Humor can soften certain painful realities, and it can demonstrate how issues take on various levels of meaning and importance when viewed from different perspectives. When humor is allowed in the classroom, a balance is struck between the serious and fun aspects of learning.

For learning to be worthwhile, it must also be made relevant whenever possible. When students are shown how classical theories, global interests, social concerns, or environmental issues relate to their present and future lives, learning becomes more focused and is embraced more personally. Instruction must attempt to present the data being taught from a societal as well as individual perspective. On the other hand, when personal parallels cannot be drawn, the instructor must convey that learning solely for the sake of learning is an equally worthwhile pursuit.

Students must not only be guided to delve deeply into the discipline being taught, they must also be encouraged to improve their overall academic skills. An effective faculty member must help students understand assigned readings at face value as well as on a conceptual level. The faculty member must be concerned with the writing of assignments as well as their academic content. Finally, the faculty member must provide opportunities for verbal expression that enable students to practice communicating clearly as well as arguing logically. In giving weight to all academic skills, the professor helps students prepare for advanced studies and for future achievements as intelligent workers and involved members of society.

Teaching excellence is about being available for students inside and outside the classroom. Beyond attending to educational needs, a teacher must be able and willing to maintain an awareness of the “total” student. We must be sensitive to their moods, be flexible in our methods, and be ready to reach out to students when we have cause for concern. The professor must let students know he cares about them and wants to applaud their successes as well as help them through their difficulties.

I believe that teaching is an art – an art worth pursuing and perfecting, because teachers can and do make a difference in their students’ lives! By instruction and by example, a faculty member’s charge is to promote critical thinking, intellectual analysis, constructive interaction and expanded awareness. Our imposing job is to give students the finest possible preparation for assuming the rights and responsibilities of college educated, global citizens. Our fulfilling reward is an avenue for passing on one’s passion for knowledge and instilling a lifelong desire in others to learn, achieve and excel.

How Research/scholarship Is Integrated Into Teaching

Most of my research efforts and publications are in Italian-American Studies, and I incorporate many of my findings into two of my related courses, The Italian-American Experience and Media Images of Italian-Americans. Drawing upon my research, I focus on similarities of past and present experiences among various immigrant groups.

For my other courses, I also use the socio-historical information derived from my research about other groups. For example, in my Introduction to Sociology course, I compare religious and folkloric components of Italian-Americana to those aspects found in other ethnic groups. I pay attention to the different as well as the universal characteristics demonstrated in specific cultural groups.

One of my major areas of research has been in Italian-American comedy. My findings are applied in class through discussions of the specific role of Italian-American comedy as well as the generic functions of humor in individual and societal contexts. The multicultural mix of students in my classes enables us to explore cross cultural types and uses of humor.

In my research, I use a quantitative approach to data collection. I use participant-observation as well as interviewing methodologies. My expertise in these sociological techniques enables me to teach the students to apply these procedures to undertake their own research. Thus they are able to realize enhanced levels of understanding relative to the individuals and groups they are studying.

Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Techniques

While I employ such conventional teaching aids as the chalkboard and videos in my classroom, my teaching techniques are unconventional in the sense that they are an extension of my personality and expression of myself. At the beginning of each semester, I ask students to submit photos of themselves, which I study and memorize so as I am able to recognize them by face and name. I believe that my efforts to know my students as individuals foster a sense of belonging, feelings of ease, and an attitude of partnership in the learning process. I invite my students to enjoy a mutual respect for each other and the exchange of ideas that takes place in a friendly setting.

My classes are punctuated by lively discussions, which I initiate through my energetic, dynamic and sometimes dramatic presentation of theories and concepts. (I've been known to act out scenarios that portray different social behaviors, in the interest of educational entertainment.) My thorough preparation and "rehearsing" for each class enables me to raise questions, monitor

attentiveness, and make points in ways that challenge students to respond and motivate them to participate. I am constantly moving around the room, front and back, side to side. This keeps students engaged and alert as they never know when I will be “in their face.”

Other Information Demonstrating Teaching Effectiveness

Former students have contacted me through the years, and those who have become teachers at all levels tell me that they have employed many of my techniques and adopted my style of teaching. Some even laughingly remind me I had told them to pay attention because someday they might need to “borrow” my teaching devices to get through to their students.

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