

# Teaching: Igniting the Fire Within

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“The mind is a fire to be kindled, not *a vessel to be filled.*”  
Plutarch (1993; p. 238)

*Dr. Lowell Mason (1875) asked teachers to reflect on the question: “Do we awaken the spirit of learning or dull it” (p.5)? After some quality reflection I have concluded that it is my privilege to be entrusted with the responsibility to awaken or “light the fire” in the hearts of my students. However, I also realize that there is a delicate balance that must be achieved in order to ensure that the fire is not quenched in the process. My grandmother often told me that you can lead a horse to water but if the horse is not thirsty, he cannot be forced to drink. Students can be led into a classroom, persuaded to buy a book and may even read that book and yet if they are not interested in the subject matter, they will not learn. We hope that our students arrive in our classes motivated to learn the subject matter, but this is not always the case. Therefore, the primary role of the teacher is to entice the student to drink of the knowledge, to ensure that the knowledge is understandable and subsequently, ensure that the students thirst for more. We become learning managers, orchestrating experiences that assist our students in achieving certain learning objectives. Perhaps this is an oversimplification, but this motto is the cornerstone of my approach to teaching. The remaining three cornerstones of my philosophy focus on the students, the subject matter, and the teacher.*

## First Cornerstone - The Students

The student is our most important resource, a valuable resource that only needs to be tapped. I believe that if I expect the best of my students, the students will rise to those expectations. These expectations, however, must be tempered with sensitivity to their needs and abilities. Davis (1993) stated, “the instructor’s task is to interact with students in ways that enable them to acquire new information, practice new skills, and reconfigure and expand on what they already know. One implication is that there is no one best instructional method - - what constitutes effective teaching depends on the students, the context, the topic, and the discipline” (p. xix). It is essential that we devise strategies designed to better understand and know the student and their inner needs and expectations. I encourage my students to communicate with me through a variety of means including in person, by telephone, electronic mail, and fax or via the Web. It is my practice to arrive ten to twenty minutes early for class in order to allow for an informal exchange of information regarding their activities and current concerns. This practice allows me to informally discuss current topics in the news, answer questions regarding

the reading, ask about their activities, and build an open relationship with the students. This rapport with the students has proved instrumental in cultivating positive group dynamics and individual respect that facilitates open communication. Open and frequent communication is essential to achieving four of the seven principles for the improvement of undergraduate teaching identified by Chickering and Gamson (1987):

1. Encourages student-faculty contact.
2. Encourages cooperation among students.
3. Encourages active learning.
4. Gives prompt feedback.
5. Emphasizes time on task.
6. Communicates high expectations.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 1).

Achieving these principles has become increasingly difficult with the changing culture, the role of technology in our daily lives, and the changing student population. The non-traditional student has become commonplace in our classrooms. Many of our students are parents, full-time employees, or seasonal employees with past experiences and insights that provide an additional dimension to our learning environment. Building upon this resource, we can teach from the known to the unknown. We can design collaborative or service-learning projects that provide an opportunity for students to learn from each other, from professionals in the field, or the participants in programs led by the students.

“To prepare students for full participation in our society and the world, it is obvious that student-active techniques are more effective than traditional ones. To prepare students for the business and professional world in particular, cooperative learning is an essential part of their college experience” (Nilson, 1998, p. 117). Unfortunately, the grading policies of higher education typically stress competition rather than cooperation. Therefore, students are challenged to develop the critical teamwork skills and attitudes essential for workplace collaboration (Davis and Miller, 1996). Designing and implementing cooperative learning may utilize Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD) to develop a solution to a problem or a quiz that will be given at the conclusion of a lesson unit to determine the mastery of the material achieved by the entire class. Service-learning experiences use volunteerism in order to link the conceptual material covered in a course with its application in the community. The Jane Goodall Institute’s Roots & Shoots program has provided an effective service-learning experience where my students can apply concepts gleaned from the programming and leadership class. Student teams (STAD) develop a program plan, and organize and lead activities with children in the community based after-school environmental education and recreation program. Weekly reflection exercises conducted in the classroom facilitate an opportunity for students to develop an understanding of how they feel regarding their service-learning experiences. The Three-Step Interview technique allows a student to interview a partner using a series of questions, such as, “Reflecting on last week’s lecture, which of

the behavior management techniques did you feel most comfortable utilizing this week with the children in the Roots & Shoots program?" (Nilson, 1998; Jacoby & Associates, 1996).

### **Second Cornerstone: The Subject Matter**

The third cornerstone of my teaching philosophy is focused on the subject matter. Students rely on their instructors being well prepared and knowledgeable regarding the subject. Fortunately, my years working in the leisure service field have prepared me to know the subject matter intimately. My professional and academic preparation has been essential in providing me with the tools and knowledge to go beyond the typical content of a textbook.

Bloom recommends that teachers should: "(1) organize subject matter into manageable learning units, (2) develop specific learning objectives for each unit, (3) develop appropriate formative and summative assessment measures, and (4) plan and implement group teaching strategies, with sufficient time allocations, practice opportunities, and correct re-instruction for all students to reach the desired level of mastery" (McIlrath & Huin, 1995, p. 123). Therefore, my class presentations use the required readings as a framework for each day's learning experience. I believe in giving the student their money's worth. It is my policy to begin class promptly with a listing of the learning objectives for the day. As previously stated, I adapt a variety of teaching strategies or learning experiences to the content being covered and to the student's knowledge and skills. If my presentation ends early, I use the rest of the class period to review key ideas, upcoming assignments, or open the class to discussion on the subject.

Students have the right to know what will be covered in the course and what is expected of them from the very first day of the class. The University of Utah Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism requires each instructor to develop an extended syllabus for each course. An extended syllabus includes a course description, accreditation standards, learning objectives, course content, an outline of lecture topics, class times, my schedule of office hours, a detailed outline of all assignments, assignment evaluation criteria, grading procedures and scale, assigned readings, a list of additional resources and a copy of the department's classroom policies. My students have access to the Web Course Tools (WebCT), a series of password protected web pages. Some of the WebCT features include a bulletin board, private mail, review quizzes, the extended syllabus, student grade book, and copies of lecture presentations. Students have stated that WebCT is very beneficial to note taking. The bonus to this policy is that these outlines allow the student to listen to what I say rather than take meaningless notes.

Whatever the specific subject, I feel that it is important to create a need to know the subject matter. A teacher can create excitement by demonstrating how to apply the knowledge to a real world setting. Beyond the typical translation of a series of facts and concepts, students enjoy the opportunity to learn how to use the ideas in real world setting. They savor the challenge to formulate decisions based on facts and ideas or

discover new applications of “old” theories. Since the leisure service field is a dynamic industry where the pace of growth and expansion has outstripped many of our textbooks, I encourage a degree of rebellion and doubt where the textbook is concerned. I also recognize students who question traditional thought with new ideas. From a practitioner’s viewpoint, I value the ability to think critically and solve problems using one’s common sense. The achievement of this skill is essential for success in their future careers.

### **Final Cornerstone: The Teacher**

The final cornerstone of my teaching philosophy is focused on the teacher. As the teacher, facilitator, scholar, or servant role model, I serve as the manager of the learning experience. I facilitate many different learning experiences through various teaching methods. Lectures are filled with questions that spark discussions, assign “observational” exercises for the next class, organize debates, show videos or slide presentations, and utilize visually stimulating presentations. Class sessions may include role-playing, Nominal Group Techniques, problem solving exercises, guest speakers, impromptu speeches, field trips and other related activities. Several of the classes that I teach have been designated as University of Utah service-learning courses (PRT 3320 Recreation Leadership and Supervision, PRT 5460 Marketing for Recreation and Tourism Services, and PRT 5470 Contemporary Issues in Travel and Tourism). Additionally, each of my classes utilizes the University of Utah’s Web Course Tools (WebCT). Steven Bell and I developed the first University of Utah on-line course fulfilling the university’s diversity requirement. The PRT 3310 Human Diversity and Leisure Behavior course reaches students on and off campus. Yet, I must often remind myself that the integration of a variety of learning experiences should be a direct outgrowth of your learning objectives, not just tricks to gain attention.

A teacher needs to be sufficiently enthusiastic in order to interest the students. This may require some performance skills in order to project in a poorly designed facility. If a professor is bored with the subject, then the students will either sleep or not attend class. Teachers must vary their presentation delivery by modifying their vocal tone, pitch, volume, and tempo. I find it is effective to use movement, facial expressions, noise and/or eye contact to draw attention to key points, to draw students into the dynamics of the lesson.

“People cannot be told how to be responsible, knowledgeable, or caring citizens. They must be involved in the process” (Cirone, 1989, p. 5). There is no better demonstration of the importance of community service and professional commitment than a servant role model. I believe it is important that students become active in professional organizations and their communities. Therefore it is important that I take an active role by serving as a volunteer in the community and professional organizations. I challenge my graduate students to join me in presenting at our national, state and regional organizations. I involved my students in the organization, marketing, and operation of the

2001 SPRE Teaching Institute. I also have taken an active role in reinstating, sponsoring and advising our student organization, The Recreation and Parks Society (RAPS). Together we sponsor monthly speakers, brown bag discussions, and service projects. This past Christmas, we collected, sorted and delivered over two and half tons of food to the Utah Food Bank.

As a scholar we should be committed to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, therefore we should strive to evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching methods. Do our students achieve the learning objectives we established at the beginning of the semester and/or the lesson? Were we successful in achieving our targets? If not, then how could we improve the learning environment to ensure that we achieve our objectives in future classes.

We must make the time to attend national conferences, such as the biannual SPRE Teaching Institute. This institute provides an opportunity to disseminate and discuss ideas, to network and build partnerships, and to renew our spirit and enthusiasm. Schole provides a valuable means to continue this effort and subsequently develop instructional materials that will impact our discipline nationwide. Parker Palmer (1998) contemplates the value of this type of gathering, as a valuable aspect of the evolution of the teacher, as fire is to the evolution of steel, so is mutual contemplation and exploration to the evolution of good teaching.

“We need to learn how to do so, for such a gathering is one of the few means we have to become better teachers. There are no formulas for good teaching, and the advice of experts has but marginal utility. If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft” (Palmer, p. 141). I have been blessed with wonderful mentors and a talented community of teachers throughout my career. Three individuals were pivotal to my development. Dr. Ed Heath and Dr. Carrie Holland served as advisors at critical points in my academic preparation. You inspired me with your excellence in teaching and humanism. Dr. Lyle Beaver ignited the fire within when he orchestrated the transformation of a timid and shy undergraduate student into a confident and outspoken leader. He challenged us each day to “Go out and become the best person you can become.” I challenge myself every day to be the best teacher I can become. There can be no greater challenge than to teach . . . to ignite the fire within each student who comes my way.

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