

Teaching

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Teaching; that is, the dissemination of information, imparting of knowledge or skill, is interesting work, has value, and brings me a certain amount of satisfaction. But it is the sort of teaching that brings about learning that plays, nearly dances, inside of me like a small child completely and totally full of herself. I take great pleasure in learning, and even greater pleasure in watching others learn. Teaching, when I do it well, provides me with both.

Just yesterday, as I headed back to my office after my first class, I was greeted by a huge yellow cutout of a road sign – complete with a post and a small patch of grass - on the wall in the hallway where most of our offices are located. The sign, posted by two of our undergraduates, read: CAUTION! PROFESSORS AT PLAY! There was another one across from the main office. At least twice a week, Susan will wander in and out of my office, pacing up and down the hall, gripping and tossing a baseball. She's warming up for class. And with some regularity, Andy will roll out into the hall in his office chair, too excited about his lecture to be contained in a 90 square foot space, and begin to quiz us on the topic. Who in our hallway will ever forget the lecture on potentially hazardous foods! This is where I work; this is where I teach. Good teaching is perpetuated in an environment like this; and so, I am certain that good teachers to become even better teachers can use the things I am about to share from my own teaching.

Celebrating Humanness

Here are some things that I believe to be true about people. I first read them in Dattilo's (1994) Inclusive Leisure Services text and use them regularly to celebrate humanness with my students.

I believe that each person is unique and different from all other people.

I believe that each person is an entire person with many different qualities.

I believe that each person has unknown potential for growth and development.

Sometime early in the semester I tell the people who have gathered in the classroom with me that I believe these things to be true about me and about each of them. I encourage them to believe these things about themselves and about each other and so I have them say these things out loud, to a classmate.

I am unique and different from all other people.

I am an entire person with many different qualities.

I have unknown potential for growth and development.

And then to turn to someone in the classroom and say these things, to that person, out loud.

You are unique and different from all other people.

You are an entire person with many different qualities.

You have unknown potential for growth and development.

I want each of us to be full of ourselves. I want us to recognize and celebrate our own uniqueness, our own worth, our own wholeness and I want us to encourage all others to do the same. I want us to know that difference does not connote either dominance or subordination, but rather that differences are just differences and can be exciting, stimulating, challenging, healthy, comforting, unsettling, enlightening . . . and the list goes on. Finally, although I believe that what we will be doing together is important, I express to them my respect for what they have already learned and for all of their previous teachers. I place our incredibly brief time together on a lifelong continuum of learning, doing, teaching, and remembering. I encourage us to embrace this time together as fully as possible, since we have no way of knowing just yet what role it will play, what impact it will have, what place it will take on this continuum.

Clarity and Integrity

In its broadest sense, teaching is simply reminding others of what they already know. In all of my classes, as well as presentations, there are at least a few ideas that do just that. I take the ideas and beliefs that the individual learner held at one time, and my teaching allows them to come back into view, dusts them off, so that they can be considered, thought and felt again. Focusing the learner's attention on a few clearly stated ideas and offering exposure to those ideas from a variety of perspectives, and through a variety of media, enhances the likelihood of learning. Moreover, giving the learner a chance, not only to grasp new bits of information, but to also make that information whole by combining it with previous knowledge or placing it into a greater context also enhances the likelihood of learning.

These ways of thinking make two things immediately important in the classroom: clarity and integrity. I try to communicate as clearly and honestly as possible and I encourage others to do the same. For each course that I teach, I identify the five or so ideas about which I want each of us to become clearer and more honest. I ask, for example, what do you believe to be true about the role of recreation and leisure in the lives of individuals? What do you believe to be true about people who happen to have disabilities? We begin the semester by responding to each question and then, like most

classes, we begin a series of learning experiences in and out of the classroom, on and off campus. After each experience we respond to these same questions, using each time as an opportunity to become clearer and more honest about what we believe to be true.

A major part of this movement toward increased clarity and integrity is the creation of our own responses. In the classroom we are encouraged to always create our own responses rather than react with what we have come to believe is “supposed” to come next. Here’s the illustration I use in the classroom. A first grade teacher gathered some old, well-known proverbs. She gave the young students the first piece of the proverb and had them come up with the rest. So rather than “Children should be seen and not . . . (heard),” she got “Children should be seen and not . . . spanked or grounded.” Rather than “Better to be safe than . . . (sorry),” she got “Better to be safe than . . . to punch a fifth grader.” Rather than “A penny saved is . . . (a penny earned),” she got “A penny saved is . . . not much.” And finally, rather than “An idle mind is . . . (the devils workshop),” she got “An idle mind is . . . the best way to relax.” Since they did not know what was “supposed” to come next, their responses were creations, more clearly and more honestly reflecting what they believed to be true. Here’s the thing: Much of the stuff we have come to believe as being true may or may not in fact be true, or at least not true for all of us.

Safe Place

Along with the opportunity and encouragement to create our own responses comes the opportunity to state the truth about us without being judged. I want each of us to feel as safe as possible, as often as possible, during this time together. The opportunity to recall, to raise questions, to reflect, to think through, and to practice in as natural a setting as possible, can be facilitated with relative ease through a variety of techniques. These opportunities will most fully, and perhaps only, be seized when the learners believe that they are in a safe place, a place where questions, opinions, confusion, diversity of thought, and a variety of paces are greeted with respect and honor.

As often as possible I provide students the opportunity to state the truth about themselves without being judged, evaluated, or scored. For example, I present students with the following scenario.

You’re walking along Main Street with some of your buddies. You come upon a person who happens to have a visual impairment and is quite clearly disoriented, perhaps as a result of the repairs being done on the sidewalk.

Your buddies immediately engage in what you have come to know as insensitive language and some laughter.

The students’ task is to identify what they see as the best possible outcome, and some strategies that could be applied in an attempt to achieve that “best possible” outcome. Then, separate from their responses, they are given the

opportunity to get honest with themselves. I provide them with a continuum. They read over what they have written and consider the likelihood that they would actually apply the strategies they suggested as a result of their studies. They place themselves along the continuum, stating the truth without getting judged.

Self-Determination

Frequently, and always in EDU 515 – Leisure Education, students are given the opportunity to develop a portion of the course themselves. It is called a self-directed study, and in this portion, students determine for themselves what knowledge they want to gain from the course. They receive a grade on their plan as well as on the implementation of the plan. The plan involves the development of as many as three expected outcomes along with learning experiences or assignments that they will complete. They go on to determine how the assignments will be evaluated including by whom and against what criteria. This process is always met with great resistance! I recall the only time I was given this same opportunity as a student and I share this with them. Jean Mundy walked into my graduate school classroom at Florida State University with no course syllabus. She took a seat up front and after some introductions said, “So, what do you want to learn?” This went on for weeks; at least it feels like that in my mind now! Then finally, we realized that she had been giving us little pieces of information that we could then use to create a course for ourselves, and that she wasn’t going to break! More than twenty years have passed and I still remember the books that I chose to read in her course that semester. I don’t believe I can say that for too many of my other graduate classes.

As I have prepared this manuscript, I have decided that every course I design from now on will have a self-determination piece in it. I will list the traditional course objectives and then leave a space for students to add one or two of their own. And I will list the required readings and then leave space for students to list one or two readings that they would like to complete this semester. Finally, I will list the assignments that I would like for them to complete and then leave room for students to come up with an assignment or two of their own.

As often as possible I want to provide students with the opportunity to enhance their sense of self-determination and freedom, sense of mastery and enjoyment. Sound familiar? Much of what we do in the classroom could be enhanced if we as educators give students the opportunity to experience many of the concepts we are presenting, and if we design courses that put these concepts into practice.

And Finally: Some Important Lessons Learned

In the spring of 1996 I was awarded my first sabbatical. Over and over again, in my head, I wrestled not with what to do with the time, but rather whether or not to even take it. I knew if I took the sabbatical I would have to return to teaching afterwards, at

least for a year, and I was not sure if I wanted to do that. Let me give you some background. I earned my doctorate from Penn State while I was a full-time instructor there. Semester after semester, I taught three classes and took two and was a full time student in the summers. I started work when I woke up and stayed with it until I just had to go to bed, and I did that almost every day for seven years. I came to Cortland the following fall and simply picked up where I had left off, sixteen to eighteen hours days, six to seven day weeks, twelve months a year. As a senior member of Cortland's faculty, I understand now how exciting it must have been to have someone come on board who was good at lots of stuff, especially those tasks involving high-volume student contact, and who was on a tenure track, so I rarely, if ever, said no to an offer to do this or to serve on that. When my sabbatical rolled around, I had been teaching for sixteen years, seven of those years at Cortland, and had acquired three chronic conditions, each attributed to stress, each with its own medication.

Here's what I learned on my sabbatical; here's what has come to shape so much of my teaching.

I believe in putting students first, right after my family and my friends, right after me.

I believe in the power of self-knowledge, of rest and reflection, and the time to enjoy them,

I am more honest, not only teaching what I teach with great passion, but also living what I teach with equal or greater passion.

I teach my topic, but always with the underlying message about the importance of clarity and integrity.

I believe in the importance building safe places, of providing students with opportunities to discover and express their truths without judgment.

I believe in the importance of creating responses rather than simply learning to respond with what is "supposed" to come next.

I am in my office fewer hours than ever before, but when I am there, I am fully present.

I am able to more clearly discern which office issues concern me and which ones do not.

I am on a ten-month appointment. I will take a two-month sabbatical every year.

There are so many different ways to teach, to learn, and to know. The really important thing then is to become as clear and honest as possible, and to share and mentor one another. It is an honor to be recognized for excellence in teaching by my peers. I am grateful to the selection committee, to SPRE, and most of all to my colleagues and friends who participated in the nomination process. Imagine how much more clear and honest I am as a result of having written this article.