

Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy is born from my own experiences as a student. I am a first-generation college student. In the beginning of my undergraduate studies, I felt lost. There were so many majors to choose from, numerous opinions on various subjects, and countless activities to participate in. The broad range of opportunities provided by institutions of higher learning are necessary, and yet difficult to navigate. I had two professors, Dr. Miles and Dr. Wilson, that each had a profound impact on my understanding of what it means to be a teacher. My philosophy of teaching revolves around two principles demonstrated by these two educators. First, I strive to be a student-centered teacher. Second, my goal is to build intrinsically motivated, lifelong learners. Dr. Miles and Dr. Wilson provided opportunities for their students to meet with them and work on extra projects. This personalized instruction served as a catalyst for me in finding my interest in politics, policy, and teaching. Let me now take time to explain the implications of these principles to my teaching.

It is crucial for a student-centered instructor to remember what it is like to be a student. There is a power differential in the student-teacher relationship that can often get in the way of true learning. This power differential is manifest in students' nervousness to ask, "stupid questions". Other times, students do not fully engage in class out of fear of either looking like they did not prepare sufficiently for class, or because they did not complete an assignment. A student-centered teacher does not lower standards if their students do not meet them. Rather, they must maintain high standards while encouraging students to use their mistakes as an opportunity to learn.

Often, students are afraid of failure. This creates an incentive to cut corners or not try at all. When I first started teaching, I noticed that some students would drop a course after the first assignment or test. They feared that one or maybe two mistakes would define their whole semester. Before I started teaching lab for a quantitative methods course, I heard from students that it was a class that they tried to avoid for as long as possible. During my first lab, I explained the job opportunities a knowledge of statistics provided. I sympathized with their feelings of anxiousness and provided a framework for their success. Part way through the semester, one student came to my office and admitted that they had not put in the effort to be successful in the class. They asked if it was better to withdraw from the class or try and make a passing grade. Together, we reviewed their grades and worked to determine how the student could pass. I was honest in my explanation that it would take a lot of work, but stressed that it was still possible to learn useful skills and get an acceptable grade. This student passed the course.

Now, at the start of every new course, no matter the subject, I make it clear to my students that it might be challenging for them, and that it is natural to get confused, but I am here to help them. I reiterate throughout the semester that they can either come to my office hours or send me an email so we can find a time to meet. This is only effective if, one, students believe that they will receive help, and two, understand that it is not embarrassing to seek help. In fact, I like to impress on them that the most successful students seek support.

My class sizes have been relatively small thus far, however, the practice of teaching to individual needs can apply to larger lectures as well. This happens through the support of peers. Peers can provide some of the greatest support and insights to one another. I believe that a student-centered teacher encourages interaction between students. I cannot personally help every student in a lecture of two hundred. However, I will facilitate peer learning by providing assessments that encourage cooperation between students. For example, during labs I encourage each table to think of themselves as a group. I make them responsible for helping each other through tricky assignments. One of these groups even created a study group for exams. They were excited to share with me the progress they were making together. This same model can be used in larger lectures, in various ways, to foster the same kind of shared learning.

To facilitate cooperative learning between students, it is crucial to create a safe environment where diverse ideas can be shared, scrutinized, and developed or abandoned. This is also necessary to encourage critical thinking. As an instructor, I set the example in my classroom by allowing my students to bring up appropriate topics that we then discuss. After the recent 2016 election, I had some students that were thrilled, while others were frightened by what the Trump Presidency could bring. Both sets of students sought me out to discuss their thoughts. In class, we had a wonderful conversation about being gracious to our classmates whether our candidate won or loss. The students also determined that either way, they would do what they could to make the world around them better. After class, several students thanked me for allowing them to work through this together.

The goal for a student-centered teacher is not to pour information into the heads of their students. They know that their true calling is to help students become lifelong learners. This transcends understanding the materials for a single class. As an instructor, I am more interested in a student learning how to minimize procrastination, or identify a way to capitalize on academic strengths, than I am in their final grades. This is how I know they are becoming intrinsically motivated to learn. It is essential for me to view my students as lifelong learners, even if I only have them in class for one semester. As I walk on campus, I take time to stop former students to see how they have progressed. They tell me about internships, other classes, and applying to jobs. Several have asked me to write them letters of recommendation.

When I teach, I look to see how my students are responding to me and the material I am covering. My purpose as a teacher is to build intrinsic motivation within my students. The reason students often fail to accomplish goals is because they are motivated for the wrong reasons. Grades are not an end goal, but are a way for a student to measure their learning. I want my students to create their own assignments, to help them meet their goals. So far, I have done this by engaging with my students at the end of a semester to see which assignments they found useful. When I teach methods, I like to provide them with different datasets that they can choose from for their final projects. I take the time to search for something that aligns with their interests. In so doing, I have noticed that they begin taking ownership of their final papers. I have seen some of the most brilliant work come from undergraduates learning statistics and the R programming language for the first time.

In a future course, I would like to give students the opportunity to pick a public meeting to attend. Then I will have them write about what they experienced and what they learned. Students interested in law can go see a local courthouse. Those interested in public administration can view a planning meeting. This is one way that I can encourage intrinsic learning. I want my students to learn to love learning. Every student takes classes they enjoy and some they dislike. By taking the effort to give them as much control over their education as possible, we create a lifelong love of learning that is not bound by subject or vocation.

My life has been changed by educators who took the time to become mentors. Now, I have the profound opportunity to help others create and achieve their goals. Likewise, it is important to learn from our students. As I have strived to refine my teaching, I have found that my students are my best teachers. My student-centered philosophy seeks not only to empower all students to become intrinsically motivated learners, but for each of us to develop a love for lifelong learning.