

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING STATEMENT



It is interesting that Western tradition's two most famous teachers, Socrates and Jesus Christ, taught by example and did not write their philosophies onto papyrus. In fact, other people wrote their stories for them. Initially, I thought this was a great idea because trying to articulate, in prose, my philosophy of teaching was proving to be a difficult task, especially since I am not a trained educator. As you probably guessed, I was unable to find someone willing to write my teaching philosophy, so here it is in its entirety.

Despite the fact that librarians are inundated with exponential information growth, increasing legislation, decreasing budgets, new information formats, evolving technologies *et cetera*, we must remain unperturbed and continue to practice the fine art of Librarianship while staying true to our core professional values. Being an academic librarian in the 21st century is exciting and challenging for many reasons.

Academic Librarianship is exciting largely because we are able to work with an array of new and innovative technological tools that help us quickly provide information of quality to students and faculty. Furthermore, reading and writing skills, “technologies” that undoubtedly outshine other technologies, are continuously taught to students by librarians, but; unfortunately, reading and writing are seemingly forgotten skills in our “technologically-advanced” world adding to one of our main challenges. So, in addition to my primary responsibility of providing information of quality to students and faculty and supporting my institution’s mission and curricula, I also conduct research methods and library orientation sessions. During these sessions, basic bibliographic methodologies are introduced; while I ultimately emphasize the importance of, and facilitate the acquisition of computer and information literacy skills.

During my undergraduate and Master's studies at the University of South Florida, I was awarded a Library of Congress fellowship to archive Leonard Bernstein’s documents and was also selected as a technology liaison between the Bill Gates Learning Foundation and Florida public libraries. Both opportunities, although focusing on different aspects of Librarianship, have proven to be beneficial throughout my career as a librarian and teacher.

Archiving taught me the importance of historical narration, persistence, and meticulousness; though I did not understand the consequences at the time, these ideas were wedged into my mind and helped with the development of what my teaching philosophy is today. During my tenure at our national library, I had the opportunity to present my work to the Librarian of Congress, James H. Billington. Admittedly, I was apprehensive to speak to a government official who was elected by President Reagan, but Dr. Billington’s adept storytelling evaporated

any anxiety that I had and opened the lines of communication. I immediately believed that Dr. Billington was on “my level” and I was then able to comfortably present my archival work to him and his panel.

Being a technology liaison with the Gates Learning Foundation prepared me for teaching technology-related classes. Many people face our hi-tech society with trepidation and I learned to spotlight my attention on the learner and to provide useful feedback to them so that they will, first, understand why it is important to be computer/information literate and, second, to develop these skills while applying it in their own words to their own lives. In my experience, formulating new concepts into one’s own words has been one of the most productive methods for deep learning and clear understanding.

I believe that the most profound learning occurs when a student actively participates and produces a personal learning paradigm. I can mediate this type of learning by simply creating useful activities that accompany the lecture in order to help make the material “stick.” I look to Mathematics and other actively engaged courses for alternative active learning models to apply to my courses. For instance, I like to develop a research-based problem and invite a group of students to the white board so that they can attempt to solve the problem via a concept map or whatever method they choose. Students still in their seats can offer advice as well. If all goes well, all of the students will participate in their learning and individually connect the lecture to the activity and, as a result, make it a part of them.

Because learning is an active process, it is essential for the instructor to create an atmosphere that is comfortable and open, so that students do not fear the act of trying something new or traveling into unknown territory. I learned from Dr. Billington that it is easier to create this atmosphere if I am, first and foremost, on my student’s “level.” Secondly, it is essential that I understand who my students are, why they are enrolled in the class, if they have any learning challenges or alternative learning styles, if there are any cultural differences that can be highlighted and investigated, or if they have any prior knowledge or anxiety on the subject and address any problems.

I see my teaching role, not as a lecturer, but as a guide or mentor who facilitates the learning process and persuades my students to personally discover the answers and to let them know that it is possible for them to achieve their full potential in my class and throughout their lives. I do inform my students that learning is a difficult venture, but that we will be on the journey together and emphasize that we will make mistakes along the way. Teaching is an active process as well, and I frequently move away from the lectern to illustrate to the students that I truly care about their individual progress.

Mastering my subject matter is important, so that I can clearly and comfortably communicate while demonstrating the course goals to my students. I systematically guide students through the material in order for them to understand and apply the course's learning objectives into "real-life" situations. In my Research Methods course, I begin with a promise that they will, indeed, get something of value, which they can utilize for life: not just for the course. A key component in my class is the notion of learning how to learn and, subsequently, becoming a lifelong learner. In order for the information that I am conveying to become "real" to them and not simply hypothetical, I will lecture on an assignment that the student's are currently investigating and ask critical questions to encourage my students, as well as me, to think critically about their topics.

Guiding students through new concepts and providing sufficient time for them to communicate with their peers is a mutually enriching experience for the students as well as the instructor. Collaborative learning is essential for deep learning and I believe, along with educational psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, that learning is a social process and that students must communicate and share what they know and what they hope to know. It is unfortunate, but many teachers assign a broad topic and require a certain amount of resources to utilize in a research paper, but they do not express the significant process of gathering, evaluating, uniquely synthesizing, and communicating their ideas. In my opinion, it is the synthesis and communication of ideas that is most important. Again, activity is a key component of learning.

I agree with Galilei's idea that "you cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him discover it in himself" and realize that my students do the majority of learning on their own and that my role as a teaching will change as they become more independent. It is true that teachers are measured by how well their students do after they leave your classroom. So, teaching students to learn how to think for themselves is so much better than teaching them to rent the opinions of others. Luckily, Socrates found someone, Plato, to write his *Dialogues* and introduce the Socratic teaching method and, I believe, that asking key questions for the students to answer is a great learning tool. The reverse is also important; allowing students to ask questions and to develop and solve problems does develop critical thinking skills that they can continue to use.

Teaching, as well as learning, is certainly a life-long endeavor and I am positive that my philosophy of teaching will evolve as I evolve and, consequently, learn more about myself and my students. I understand that learning never ends and I definitely learn something valuable every single day and hope that I can continue to share my experiences with others. For years, I considered myself a librarian. Now, I consider myself a librarian who teaches every step of the way explaining how and why I am finding resources, demonstrating the importance of active learning, telling intriguing and useful stories, and simply providing guidance and insight so that my students can continue to ask critical questions and supply quality answers for their entire life.

*In tenebris lux,
Chad Mairn*