

Statement of teaching philosophy

When I am preparing to teach, I often think back to a particular class I attended as a freshman in college. The subject of the course was western civilization, one of those broad survey courses that can often degrade into a litany of dates and names that are easily become decoupled from the intended themes of the course. This course was held on the art campus of the university and academic classes were sometimes met with deep resistance from students who would rather be in painting or pounding clay. In this particular class, the instructor was a philosophy professor, and the topic of the class was Plato and Aristotle. In hindsight, I can see the instructor's dilemma clearly: how to engage a bunch of art students in a discussion about the foundations of western philosophy, acknowledging that most of them had probably not read the assigned text and few if any would describe this topic as core to their path of study.

On this particular day, the instructor walked into the classroom and began to chat with students, most likely asking about their projects in other classes, joking around a bit. The topic slowly migrated to talking about our day to day experiences as art students, what projects we were working on, and how we learn to paint, draw, sculpt. He elicited personal anecdotes from students, all under the guise of interest in our stories. The conversation was certainly informal, but subtly guided by what I now recognize as strategic questions from the professor. After about 45 minutes, he started to identify themes in what we were talking about, and then, seemingly in a natural and spontaneous way, he identified curious parallels between what we were saying about our experiences and notions of representation, truth and reality in the texts we were supposed to have read. Until the moment when he began to make explicit connections, I think we had all been experiencing the discussion as casual chatting and were secretly delighted that we were "getting out of" having to sit through a lecture. When the instructor "finally" got around to addressing the scheduled topic for the class, it just seemed kind of cool that it related so closely to our informal conversation. My perspective is quite a bit different now, and I wish I could travel back in time and watch that conversation unfold, paying more attention to the subtle guiding actions of that professor.

This happened almost twenty years ago, but I remember it. I recall the conversation as being fun, stimulating, engaging and surprising. I remember feeling empowered, as territory that previously seemed out of reach was opened for exploration and play. And it is the day that I learned about and *used* Plato's Parable of the Cave for the very first time.

In the hopes of replicating this experience for my students, when I plan courses and lessons I find myself measuring it against this memory:

- *Have I presented students with opportunities to use their existing domain of knowledge in order to make sense of new concepts?*
- *Have I given students the chance to apply new knowledge to problems that are relevant to them?*
- *Have I created opportunities for students to engage in learning on their own terms?*

- *Have I give students adequate feedback that acknowledges their progress and risk-taking?*
- *Have I encouraged students to think beyond their known universe?*
- *Have I planted seeds for future discoveries?*
- *Have I taught students something that they did not know before?*

These questions illustrate some of the concerns and priorities that influence my teaching practice. My approach to teaching can largely be described in terms of four aspects of pedagogical engagement.

Broad spectrum learning

While conveying specific subject matter often drives the content of day-to-day lessons, learning activities and experiences can be designed to show students the value of asking good questions, seeking solutions from a range of sources, and using assignments to advance their own interests. Part of this involves encouraging students to map new concepts to familiar domains, like my instructor did when he guided us to discover philosophical concepts of representation within our evolving studio practices.

Broad-spectrum learning refers to having a continually evolving and growing set of skills to apply to problem solving. The saying goes that if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Especially in technology courses, specific software we teach our students to use today may very well become obsolete before the ink on their degree is dry. It is my responsibility to provide students with opportunities to learn how to learn, and to be open to a broad spectrum of solutions. My goal is to encourage my students to arm themselves with a diverse toolkit, and to understand that their skills will be continually changing and evolving as they develop as professionals. Essential to this is also fostering the ability to evaluate problems critically, from a range of perspectives, in order to create interesting, effective, innovative, or simply appropriate solutions.

Evaluation as actionable feedback

Implicit in this broad-spectrum approach is promoting an openness to experimentation and a nuanced view of failure. In order to make students comfortable with the idea of taking risks, trying new solutions, and learning to apply abstract concepts to real world situations, I make every attempt to provide adequate and appropriate feedback at regular intervals. I believe in providing rubrics whenever possible and I generally accompany numeric scores with comments reiterating the strengths and weaknesses of work. All of this is to say that while students often focus on the grade (and its ultimate impact on their GPA), evaluations can also be used to re-focus attention, provide encouragement and reward for risk-taking, and serve as actionable feedback to help students navigate new problem spaces.

Contextualization

It is my job to provide students with a context for abstract ideas. By context, I mean explaining why concepts are important and relevant, connecting theoretical principles to specific real-world events, and showing how skills or procedures can be applied in professional settings. It often involves breaking a complex problem or idea into smaller steps in order to reveal a generalizable underlying structure.

Acknowledging the knowledge that students bring to the table from the start and encouraging them to build on what they know is important. This domain of familiarity can provide a stage for contextualizing abstract problems. This becomes especially interesting in interdisciplinary classes, when students bring experiences from other domains. The entire class benefits in terms of exposure to new content and processes, and the result is a broader set of examples illustrating how abstract contents can appear in the wild. Contextualization in this sense also supports the idea of broad spectrum learning and can help set a tone of mutual respect among students from difference academic settings, essential when asking students to engage across disciplines.

Learning objectives include future outcomes

I consider my classes successful if by the end of a course I can see my students adopt a broader spectrum approach to solving problems, if they show evidence of increased critical thinking or a greater ability to use evaluations and feedback as tools for future development, or if they have an increased capacity to connect abstract concepts with real world phenomena. Although seeing evidence of the effectiveness of a specific lesson or activity or course can be highly motivating, I model my teaching practice based on an idea of continually evolving and dynamic approaches to problem solving. It follows that the results of classroom activities and experiences may gain increasing potency and relevance with time, becoming richer, more layered and generative with the accumulation of experience. My story about the class I had as an undergraduate is an example of this type of evolving outcomes. Therefore, an important, though less observable outcome of my work with students involves planting seeds that might not make sense or become integrated during the course of the semester, but might result in continued growth and learning beyond the last days of classes.

These aspects of the classroom experience signal opportunities I try to exploit when working with students and planning classes, as well as marking the moments in teaching that I enjoy the most. Every course is different and every cohort of students is unique, however by focusing on these principles, I try to give my students consistent learning experiences that are relevant, generative and extensible.