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Teaching Philosophy

As a teacher, I aim to help my students to develop and refine their practical skills for understanding and collaboratively addressing our society's fundamental challenges -- particularly those related to harmonizing natural, technological and social systems on personal through global scales. Case in point:

We descended a small, forested mound in the center of a Rhode River marsh. One of my sophomore PAGE students inquired, "How was this island formed?" On instinct, I invited her to propose her own theory, but received only a shrug. Her peers responded similarly, so I offered the current thinking: that sea-level rise at the end of the last ice age had gradually submerged the ancient Susquehanna River Valley, forming the Chesapeake Bay, and creating islands out of hills like this one... "That's *if* you believe in evolution," interjected one student. Stunned, I nonetheless calmly asked her own perspective. "Everything here was created all at once." When was that? "When God created the Earth, one million years ago." How might we go about testing that theory versus the ice-melt theory? I invited the students to consider and review sources of their own choosing for clues to the age of this habitat and evidence for and against natural variability over the course of human history.

Our follow-up discussion next session led to issues of global climate change, its potential connection to sea-level rise and flood stories in the Bible and the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh. In these ancient texts, we discovered some anecdotes quite pertinent to our modern climate problems. One of the course's "environmental problem solving teams" later decided to address deforestation – often considered a factor in human-induced climate change – through a tree-saving campaign, including awareness-raising activities on the Mall and a May Day *Broadside* editorial that documented and shared what they had learned.

This vignette captures many aspects of my teaching philosophy: Teaching constructs opportunities for learners to explore the curiosities and challenges of our world. Teaching facilitates learners' introspection and discourse about the nature of what is and what should be. Far from delivering inviolable truths, teaching challenges learners to test their own and others' assumptions, to reconcile these beliefs with their personal discoveries, and to synthesize new approaches which could very well be at odds with established wisdom. As such, the teacher has authority over the process of learning but not its product. What is learned is the unique decision (whether conscious or involuntary) of the individual learner. The teacher's duty thus lies in creating a stimulating, motivating learning process and providing relevant opportunities that help students to actively learn, to find their own purpose and to develop capacity to make beneficial contributions to society.

In terms of philosophical schools, my teaching approach is quite consistent with the century-old legacy of American Pragmatism: Regardless of one's starting point, learning is an inherently active investigative process. The resulting knowledge, theories and beliefs are always tentative. Their value derives from their problem-solving power and their ability to effectively guide subsequent actions.

To commence a course, I apply this approach by requesting my students and trainees first consider and share why they are present, what their own *a priori* learning objectives are, and what they "want to get out of it." I follow by sharing my own prepared objectives for the course. Here I often introduce the concept of indicators for measuring success, then facilitate a group effort to synthesize our various learning priorities into shared objectives with associated indicators. This custom-tailored set of objectives forms the basis of our social compact for learning together. Throughout our course, starting

with a day one "pre-test," we use the indicators to measure our status and progress in our collaborative learning. Beyond traditional teacher-graded activities, my courses incorporate peer-to-peer reviews, self-assessment and even students' interim evaluations of my own teaching and the overall course process to date.

Prior to the first day, I have designed my syllabus around a problem-solving approach to the course themes. What are the problems that should be addressed? What additional skills and resources will students likely need to understand and to address those problems? How can I help them to evaluate the impacts of their actions on the problems studied? The course is structured to provide clear expectations, logical flow and measured transition from teacher-framed to individual student- and team-led learning. I am also prepared to adapt when the unexpected occurs, such as presenting a hand-written back-up lecture when our smart classroom encountered technical difficulties, inviting peer assists from advanced students, or improvising new discussion topics in response to emerging student interests or pertinent headline news of the day.

I recognize that people learn more when they are motivated, attentive and actively involved. Thus, I design learning activities to vary in format, location, number of participants, and degree of difficulty. In one session, a student is presenting a lifecycle analysis of paper vs. plastic bags. Another day, a team of students that has examined their dormitory's trash composition proposes (and later pursues) practical actions to increase recycling there. In a third session, small groups role-play as stakeholders managing water pollution across an international border or rampant deer populations in a growing suburb. Using words from my former students' evaluations, I work to make sure each learning activity "has a point" and that the learning experience is "interesting, informative and fun."

I also like to surprise them. I create novel circumstances, such as delivering a class on Halloween in a fusion of game show and Socratic method formats, complete with candy prizes. I also encourage them to re-examine the ordinary, like why they have chosen stapler, paperclip or hole-punch to assemble a loose-leaf packet of readings from my desk. By occasionally catching them off-guard, I hope to grab their attention for "teachable moments" that may help them "to learn to think in a new way" (per the 1955 Russell-Einstein Manifesto).

I believe my role as a teacher extends beyond the classroom. I provide students incentives to actively participate and reflect upon pertinent service learning activities, interviews, field trips and field studies. In one course I taught, I promised then oversaw extended internships for any student who maintained an A average in my class. (I did not turn away any interested student with lower grades.) The eight students who took me up on this offer soon discovered I had received a state grant to finance their internships, developing the first web sites for watershed non-profit organizations across the Chesapeake Bay basin (circa 1995). I also mentored a few of these students for years afterwards, helping them to apply their then "cutting edge" computer skills to environmental and other socially responsible domains.

For me, occasional interactions with former students are among my favorite learning indicators. I ask them what they recall from our course, how it made a difference to them thereafter, and how they applied any of it to their subsequent studies, lifestyles or careers. To discover they have used what they learned to make others' lives and our world a better place, for me that is true teaching success.