

April N. Patrick

## Statement of Teaching Philosophy: Engaged Learning and Engaging Learners

My philosophy of teaching can be summarized into an eight-word statement:

***engagement is necessary for learning to take place***

This statement may seem both obvious and trite, but this single belief inspires virtually all of the work I do in the classroom. Though simple on the surface, the multifaceted nature of this statement is perhaps more apparent in a breakdown of my beliefs about the power of engagement in the classroom and how those ideas influence my teaching practices in both literature and composition classes.

I believe it is vital for everyone in the classroom to be engaged throughout the semester. This not only includes the students enrolled in the course, but it also means that I, as the instructor, am engaged every time I interact with the students. My enthusiasm for the course content and for the process of learning is a powerful example for the students, and by modeling engagement on a daily basis, I can offer my students a consistent model of being fully invested in the course. When I'm interested and excited, the students are much more likely to become active participants in the discussions and activities on a regular basis.

When students are truly engaged with a topic, they experience a higher level of learning. If they recognize the applications of the material and the skills they are learning in the classroom, I believe students are more motivated to move from basic memorization and regurgitation of material to give the answer they believe the instructor wants. By demonstrating the applications of the assignments and processes beyond the individual course or subject, I encourage students to become invested in the activities and to feel the confidence to take risks in their assignments. I believe this investment and the resulting learning processes help students to develop critical thinking skills that will benefit them over the long term.

For each of us involved in the course, I strongly believe in the importance of engagement with both the material and each other. Combining these two helps to create a positive and encouraging learning community where students feel safe to explore new concepts and to share their ideas. Based on my own teaching and learning experiences, I believe that engagement with a course can be achieved by building on the experiences and knowledge that students bring into the classroom, by helping the students to take ownership over their work and the learning process, by connecting the material to real world skills students will need beyond their college years, and by creating an atmosphere where, together, we become a community of learners.

I believe in encouraging students to engage with the material starting at the beginning of any course by building their confidence. For many students today, using online social networking tools has given them the ability to effectively present themselves and their experiences in such media. Drawing on their expertise in such self-presentation, I begin the semester with a new class by requiring each student to create a blog that visually represents his/her personality. As students design their pages and compose introductions about themselves and their previous experience with the course material, they generally write clear and organized posts. Because most students relate their 'good' writing to that done online, we discuss how the blog becomes a space where they can gather their thoughts about assignments and course material and draw connections to their personal experience in order to increase their engagement with the material. For other activities that appeal to what is familiar to them, I revise standard assignments like literary analysis essays to film adaptation proposals and social networking projects, which require the same skills as the traditional activities but offer students the opportunity to use creativity and draw on existing skills.

Additionally, I believe that students engage with the course material and assignments when encouraged to take ownership over their work in the course and over their own learning processes. By knowing the real world applications of the skills they are learning, students begin

to take ownership over the learning process, but it is also important for them to take ownership over the evaluation of their work and the grades they earn. In the classroom, I give students the opportunity to have this kind of ownership through the process of developing a grading rubric as a class. By encouraging their input on effective completion of the assignment, I provide the students with the opportunity not only to create knowledge but to also help to develop the way their work will be evaluated. In the discussion that results in a grading rubric, students often have epiphany moments when they realize the depth of their understanding of the assignment and their ability to fulfill the requirements.

I also emphasize engagement with the course content through helping the students to see how their work in the class connects with the work they will do beyond college. I believe in the power of professionalism to make the course a more powerful learning experience for everyone. Having worked in the corporate world, I share with students that part of my background from the first day of the course, emphasizing the fact that their university experience is intended to prepare them to become responsible citizens of the world. Certain aspects of professionalism apply more broadly regardless of major or future career. I strongly believe that one of these is the ability to find balance when working collaboratively and to function productively within a group. Most students groan noticeably when assigned a group project because of negative experience in the past. I share with the students my belief that collaboration in the classroom doesn't accurately reflect how it happens in other environments. To make their work together more productive, I provide guidance throughout the process and set myself up as both an administrative assistant and a stakeholder/audience in their work. The groups begin by creating job titles and responsibilities for each member as they would have in any work environment. As groups meet, I provide meeting agendas to guide their interactions and require that each group's Recorder submit minutes from each meeting. These activities help keep the groups on track, and at the end of the project, the resulting work is better because of the way the students worked together in a productive and professional manner. Because their roles are clearly defined, the students become more engaged and invested in the assignment and learn more from the experience.

In addition to engaging with course material, students also benefit from engaging with one another through a variety of community building activities. I believe that our investment in the course is linked to our investment in each other. In my classes, this group work process is one of the ways that students work together, but the process of building a community begins from the first day of the semester. Regardless of the size of the class, students are encouraged to get to know one another through regular small group activities and discussions. As students become more comfortable with each other in the small group activities, they become more engaged in whole class discussions of course material and in the material itself. Additionally, as students read and comment on each other's blogs, they engage outside of the classroom and create a virtual community that offers students uncertain about sharing in class a different method for engaging with their classmates. I believe that this engagement with one another is necessary not only for creating a community of learners in the classroom but also for helping students to engage with the course material and learn more effectively.

Based on the detailed explanation above, my philosophy of teaching might be expanded to read: I believe that learning can take place only when everyone in the classroom engages with each other and the course material. Some of the above examples demonstrate how I facilitate such engagement in my teaching and how the engagement with each other and with the material is intertwined in such a way that the overall concept of engagement is central to every part of my teaching.