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Teaching Philosophy (2014)

Recently, I had a student write to thank me for my online World Literature course she was taking, but she was not thanking me for the learning she was getting, exactly. She wanted to thank me for the positive side-effect my course was having on her "tattooed, bouncer, dropout" boyfriend who had previously had "no intentions of getting his GED or going to college". My student explained that she had been having such a great time in my course that she shared it all with her boyfriend (watching lectures together, discussing readings, researching, talking through assignments) and--she couldn't believe it--he had said he would consider trying college if there were professors like me there for him.

This anecdote demonstrates to me that many of my teaching choices are sound and beneficial, not only to my own students but also to our larger community. It illustrates my ability to bring together traditional college benefits and the special circumstances of two-year colleges. These are my teaching values:

Enthusiasm: I love my content and delight in sharing it with students. I have taught topics from argumentation to Gilgamesh term after term and still do it with enthusiasm that reaches my students. Many students resent the general education curriculum and consider humanities to be a waste of energy, of little value to meeting their goals. I, however, believe that general education and humanities have quite a lot of value for all students. I make my content matter to my students: either they discover its usefulness or they discover it is too interesting for them to ignore. Learning is hard work, but it can also be fun; I want my students to experience both.

Accessibility: I design and run robust, accessible courses. I show students what the challenges are and how to meet them, I tell them why we are doing what we are doing, I coach them toward success, and I encourage them to set and assess their own goals. At the start of a course, I have every due date on the syllabus, every assignment written, and every reading available. From the first day, students know the expectations and can begin planning to meet them. Although the rigorous structure in my courses may at first seem restrictive, I find instead that my thorough planning allows me to be flexible when necessary and respond to student needs or desires as they crop up during a course. In addition, I make sure to include resources from multiple media, genres, and stances so that each expands upon, challenges, and reinforces the others during course units. In this way, I hope to meet the needs of differing learning preferences or preparation and offer every student an invitation to learn.

Nurturing of students from their own starting points: I honor students' existing resources and help them develop their capabilities from there. One of the most important differences between open admissions and university teaching is the variable preparation and background of students sharing a classroom. I believe the variation creates a richer (if sometimes more challenging) learning experience. One of my most rewarding teaching experiences was a class that included

a fourteen-year old dual-credit earner, a great-grandmother, a couple of war veterans, two autistic men, the women's soccer team's midfielders, and several homeschooled farm kids. Their existing skills were wildly divergent; acknowledging the differences and valuing everyone's contributions brought a productive sense of collaboration to the course. We all learned a lot from each other. In Composition, for example, my students research, write, and present on topics in which they are already interested and already informed (whether obviously "academic" topics or not). In Environmental Lit, students undertake a ten-week systematic observation of a local environment of their own choosing. In Vegas Lit, students conduct an oral history project with community members. I want students to value their existing resources as useful in higher education and, conversely, realize that higher education can be useful in their lives off campus, both in the pursuit of their degrees and in lifelong learning.

General Success Skills: I use my courses to help students develop general success skills in addition to the specific course content. Every course involves opportunities to enhance research, persuasion, project-planning, time-management, persistence, and communication skills. One ingredient I have found useful in building students' skill levels is the use of frequent, short assignments. These help to keep students engaged with a course, and for general education purposes, they help students to manage their time and to develop study skills. Some of these short assignments function as incremental study guides and others ask students to experiment with an analysis tool or to consider elements that connect texts or concepts. I weight assignments such that missing just one will have minimal impact on final grades, but will also serve as a reminder to stay involved with the course. This assignment structure further allows me to recognize and to respond quickly to students who are struggling.

Connecting course content to students' "real lives": In my courses, composition students can make a process analysis video to teach classmates how to do pushups, make spaghetti, or format an annotated bibliography using MLA style. World Lit students can watch episodes of *Star Trek* and *South Park* to see how themes and references to ancient literature appear throughout contemporary pop culture. Literature students can plan their own field trip (including budget, itinerary, inoculations, visas) to visit the places we study. One element so often missing from two-year education (funnily enough, given the term "community college") is the opportunity to learn in a community. Unlike "traditional" college students, many of my students are rushing off campus to jobs or families and are unable to attend study groups or otherwise collaborate on or share their school work. Once off-campus, they often lack support for their learning. The need for community is acute, though, especially for non-traditional students, as so much informal learning takes place (peer instruction, group brainstorming, etc.), outside the walls of the classroom. To suit my students' often fragmented educational experience, I take care to create assignments that lend themselves to sharing with a student's off-campus community, whether friends, family, or some other support. Often enough, I hear from students like the one above, for whom my course served as a recruitment tool for her boyfriend. For our students who lack off-campus support or resources for their educations (especially including first-generation college students), the kind of off-campus interactivity I encourage helps to raise awareness of the higher ed mission and build support for an individual student's success.