

Teaching Philosophy

What do students know? How do they understand and express what they know? I believe that the optimal conditions for learning occur when the information that an instructor imparts to students during lectures is guided by the answer to these questions. Each class is different, with differing group dynamics and an array of varied characteristics, such as class standings (preponderance of freshmen or seniors) and personalities. No two classes are the same. These variables require that I carefully hone and edit class content each semester, catering to the uniqueness of each group. One strategy that I employed in the past was one that I borrowed from one of the best professors at Adelphi, Dr. Patrick Kelly: Have students fill out index cards with information about their hobbies, degree of existing knowledge of my discipline - history and their future goals. It was helpful to glance at these cards often and refer to this information about my students when considering the course content. Knowing which students were Social Work majors allowed me to refer to them by name during lectures about Hull House, for example. Moreover, I used the information on these cards to communicate with students regarding course work and course-related activities via cell phone numbers and e-mail throughout the semester.

While the cards were useful during my early years at Adelphi, beginning in 1999, I now use face book, moodle and e-mails to achieve these goals. Through mediums such as face book and inter-active discussion environments, I hope to counter what one study suggested: that the classroom experience is but a small percentage of a student's college experience. While students are in a position where socialization, clubs and work may play a larger part than their classes, I reach out with the hope that students will continue to think about what we discuss in the classroom a bit longer than the three fifty minute sessions per week that we are together. Some of my strategies for doing this are now dependent on these cyber space tools. Indeed, it is amazing what one can understand through a face book status. Just today, for example, a student wrote: "The problem with listening to your heart is that it doesn't always speak too clearly."

I find it immensely helpful to read such self-revealing comments because how else would I be able to convince this twenty-something student that she has something in common with Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, who

contemplated the relationship between his “head” and his “heart” in a revealing romantic letter to Maria Cosgrove in 1786.

On a practical level, keeping the channels of communication with students open allows me to answer questions and address concerns as immediately as they arise for students. Not all students take advantage of my extended communication offerings, but when they do, I find myself much better able to help them select paper topics, answer their questions, respond to their online discussion posts, examine student power point presentations prior to students’ presentation days, and help students reshape their papers before final submission. In short, my methods allow me to fulfill my goal of connecting with students as they take the many steps involved in their learning process. This close interaction allows me to maintain a constant awareness of which instructional strategies work best. Consequently, I can say that opening these channels of communication lets my students teach me how to be the best teacher I can be.

Learning about students outside the classroom is helpful in the classroom, where my preferred teaching mode is the interactive lecture, and my aim is to elicit as much student involvement as possible. A Chinese proverb - “tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I’ll understand” expresses my sentiments best. Shaped by the readings, my lectures are a synthesis of the material read by students in preparation for class, organized thematically, and punctuated by questions related to the reading. In survey courses, I aim to reach, not only history majors, but also non-majors, so that everyone can get the most from the course. Since moodle posts are usually ten percent of student grades, students can get involved in the lectures by referring to existing moodle discussion threads and responding to my questions in class, which are related to these.

Studies have shown that optimal learning and greater involvement occurs when as many senses as possible are engaged simultaneously. As often as possible, students walk into my class room and hear music from the period we are learning about, as this facilitates retention of concepts. For example, while we learned about “Jim Crow” and lynching in the Southern United States, we listened to the “ragtime” piano music of one of the greatest American composers, the African-American Scott Joplin, discussing his unique challenges during this time period. I employ this strategy with most periods in American history, and for Chinese history, the concept of healing through music is one that is often intriguing and useful for students.

The second way that I engage student senses is visually. While the skeletal framework for my lectures is on a power point, thus signaling to students the essential important themes, I also rely on this mechanism to reinforce words with visual images. I show maps of Spanish-American war sites, cartoons of Teddy Roosevelt's bellicose stance as a war hawk in 1898 and in World War I, and Jacob Riis photographs. Power points contain not only images, but also excerpts from primary sources so that students can analyze the language and discuss the document with more confidence, as it is in front of everyone. I also aim to achieve student involvement by encouraging them to discuss their papers and present power points of their own during class presentations, which might be mandatory, depending on the class.

These presentations are required in both of my 200 level "History of Women in the U.S." classes, where students learn about women of different races, classes and nationalities, rather than just "great" well-known women, from the colonial period to the present. Students' final papers require them to link the readings to the life, or lives, of one or more women by conducting interviews. Consequently, student papers can challenge or support existing historical interpretations of women in the United States based upon the interviews, refer to the readings, include a transcript with questions and present their findings to the class. Each semester student creativity and resourcefulness increasingly impresses and inspires me to modify the assignment and open up its parameters to new possibilities.

Recently, one student utilized face book to contact a young Muslim woman activist and author, originally from the United States, but living in Afghanistan. The student used email and the chat function of face book to fulfill her transcript requirement, and incorporated face book pictures of her subject in her power point presentation to the class. I suggested that students use their paper topics as the starting point for a blog that they could continue to utilize beyond the duration of my class, and several students created blogs based on their interviews. While some confessed that they had no idea how they would continue to use the blog beyond the scope of my assignment, I was happy to know that this might be a first step to encourage them to record their thoughts about what gender means and how life turns into a history that they too can examine and record.

I believe that teachers teach, not only by what they say, but by what they are, so the final way that I involve students through interactive engagement is by sharing my research goals and scholarship results with them. I share with students the questions that I ask of my research, as well as my sources, particularly in the History Sophomore and Senior Seminar research courses

that are required by the Department. Sharing with students the challenges and joys of research is rewarding, particularly as, year after year, my students participate in the Adelphi Undergraduate Research Conference, as well as the National Conference of Undergraduate Research, held at campuses across the United States.

I feel that it is important for students to be able to talk about what they learned and how they came to know it, and accept with confidence, the fact that their research conclusions and beliefs will change in the future. As Aristotle once said, “it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.” While student views evolve, writing and presentations offer a unique snapshot capturing this intellectual evolution in motion – one that benefits both students and their professor.