

Philosophy of Teaching John Vassar

At its foundation, teaching reduces to a simple relationship between the individual faculty member and the student. Teaching students, both for knowledge today and practice tomorrow, is the core mission of a university. Each of us who are blessed to serve as faculty, at some time in our lives, connected to a teacher who then often served as a mentor and guide. This passion for teaching is critical for administrators as well. When I accepted my current administrative position at LSU Shreveport, I requested that a required teaching load be added to the contract. I did so because I love teaching, but just as importantly, in my role as Provost it is critical that I teach and remain connected with this foundational enterprise of the institution.

My overall goal for teaching is to foster connections. First, I work to foster those connections with myself. I believe that students will follow you further in a course when they feel a connection to the instructor. To foster this connection, I share with them on the first day a basic biography, emphasizing points of similarity with where they are (e.g. “I didn’t take my first philosophy class as an undergraduate until this one.” or “My freshman year I was unsure what I wanted to study until I took this class”) to attempt to connect to the students. Invariably, students will go further with you if you start out where they are.

Second, I work to engage their interest in the course material. I do this in the following five ways:

1. Teach the course from the student’s perspective. I work to communicate using the language of students, from the actual vernacular they are using to referencing their culture as much as possible. Most of our students encounter academic ideas first through “low culture”. By that I mean that they may have encountered ideas like epistemological dualism (in film or music) or less common stories from the biblical text long before they step into the classroom. They encounter these ideas first through movies, songs, paintings, etc. By connecting course content (which is unfamiliar) with elements of their culture (which is very familiar) they can learn more quickly and apprehend the ideas and concepts of the course. These connections help the students to build out their worldview as they encounter ideas from class in their vocations, families, and other social settings. These examples also help to better explain the “why” of what we are studying.
2. Map out the semester. We are required to do this in our syllabus of course, but I work hard to explain the reasoning behind the construction of my syllabus. The syllabus is more than a class schedule and it is important for them to understand the sequence of the material as well as my expectations for their performance. As most of us do, I spend a lot of time thinking about the order of the material, the testing methods, the classroom environment that I want to create. For example, when I teach Introduction to Philosophy, we spend the first part of the semester looking at epistemology and ontology, two areas that the students have not spent a lot of time thinking about. We end the semester with an exploration of ethics and philosophy of religion (full of hot button topics). Many textbooks/classes reverse the order of these topics but I want to build a sense of class community before we tackle these more challenging conversations. I then explain my reasoning on the first day of class. This explanation for sequencing the material helps to prepare the students to tackle some challenging issues, (often addressing their anxiety about these topics from day one) but more importantly it sets an expectation of community that we work towards each class period.

A second example occurs when I teach the historical books of the Old Testament. One challenge for students who have grown up in the Christian tradition is to get them to think about David from a fresh perspective. In order to accomplish this, I have the students read about the ending of King David’s life in 1 Kings 2. It presents a very different picture of this man than his shepherd boy/Goliath killing beginnings. By giving thought to the sequence of the material, and explaining that sequence to students,

they get not only a better grasp of the course content, but a firmer understanding of the learning outcomes we are working toward.

3. Use technology. For my classes I use our CMS (Moodle) to post numerous videos, conduct chat sessions, and interact with students to extend our class beyond the time and room constraints of the traditional classroom setting. Social media plays an important role in my classes as I use Twitter and Instagram to stay engaged with them even after the class has ended. As digital natives, most of our students have a high comfort level with these interactions that permits me to draw them more deeply into the subject matter. It also enables me to flip the classroom with many topics. As one example, I grew weary of covering the geography of the ancient Near East for several days in class in each of my biblical studies courses. By recording a video of those lectures, I was able to put it online, require them to view it, and thus enable us to get into the literary material more quickly.
4. Communicate with passion. Students will often connect with the passion of the instructor, even if they do not connect directly with the material. As I prepare lectures/slideshows, discussions, I do so with some reflections on how these items generate interest in myself. In my experience, students can connect to material through the passion of the instructor even if they walked into the classroom with little interest in the subject matter itself. I also reference my research, even in introductory classes, to model what lifelong learning looks like.

Lastly, my Christian faith sets the context of discipleship for all of my pedagogy. Although our contemporary legal environment (as well as my own strong Baptist beliefs) prevents me from explicitly engaging in faith conversations in a state-institution classroom, I provide opportunities for students to reflect on the material that we cover in class in a thoughtful way. These reflections have inevitably led to additional conversations in my office or over a cup of coffee in the student center. Every course I teach provides a basis and an opportunity to connect more deeply with students in my classes. The conversations and relationships that build out of these courses provide me with the greatest joy and satisfaction in my career.

In conclusion, teaching is the most important, most challenging, and most gratifying activity on a college campus. Providing opportunities, resources, and thought leadership to developing and sustaining high quality teaching is an essential task of university administration.