

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

As a beginner, I have just enough experience to realize that solidifying my personal philosophy of teaching is something that will take years of teaching experience. For now, I will share some “ah-ha!” moments that have shaped how I think about teaching.

As a graduate assistant, I participated in the development and teaching of a 5-day intensive course for graduate students to learn the local flora. The instructors and, it seemed, the students had a great experience. Later, I heard through the grapevine that one student thought the whole class was a huge waste of time. All those Latin names – how was that ever going to be useful to him? It was rather deflating to hear this comment about a class that I was so invested in. Later, reflecting on it, I realized that we had just assumed that these grad students arrived already motivated to learn the material, already convinced of its importance. For the most part this was true, but obviously not for this student, and it colored his entire experience of the class. My first job as a teacher should be marketing. I need to consciously strive to convince students that the material is relevant to them, worthy of their time and attention for reasons beyond mere credit requirements.

Almost all my experiences as a student have been in lecture-oriented settings, so that is the style of teaching I am most comfortable with. However, during my experience as an interim biology professor, teaching biology to non-majors, I had an “Ah ha!” moment. I had told the students that as a first-year teacher I really needed their input to help me improve as a teacher, so one extra-credit question was to tell me specific things they liked or didn’t like about the class. One of the students who always sat in the back and seemed only marginally involved wrote that his favorite thing was an activity I had dreamed up to try to help them understand how RNA and DNA work. I had feared it was rather goofy and might not go over very well, as it involved students pretending to be molecules and carrying construction paper shapes around the room. But at least for this student it turned out to be a highlight. His comment has stayed with me and challenges me to discover ways to break out of the lecture format sometimes and find new ways to get the students to engage with the material.

Another “Ah ha!” moment came for me during a graduate class in my doctoral program. I was in way over my head in a course on advanced statistical methods and modeling, taught in a programming language I didn’t know. In one of my moments of utter frustration I recalled a comment made by a student who was really struggling in the biology class for non-majors I taught as an interim. She said, “I just don’t get it. It’s like you’re speaking an entirely different language.” At the time I thought she was just daunted by all the long scientific words, but now in a belated flash of comprehension I realized it was deeper than just the vocabulary. I emerged from my class still rather confused about Bayesian statistics but with a new sense of empathy for students who “just don’t get it”. I hope this empathy can inspire me to find better ways to connect with these students throughout my teaching career.