

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Plenty of words are bandied about in teaching statements: invested, hands-on, student-centered, encouraging, demanding, approachable, available. These are the words used to describe the kind of teacher every applicant says he or she is — or hopes to be, in any case. I will try to spare you those same buzz words you've read countless times by now and tell you, up front, that I am not perfect. I tell you this because I am not perfect (despite what my mother would have you believe). In fact, I am not a lot of things: I am not a dictatorial all-seeing, all-knowing sage who sits in judgment on the lowly unwashed students who deign to expect me to share Knowledge with them. And yet, I am not the let's go outside for class today, skip the assignments and push back the due dates so all the students will think I am their Super Cool Best Bud, either.

What I am is someone who believes that the day you believe you are a good teacher is the day you will never become one. I realize the potential folly of telling a prospective employer this, but I am not satisfied with my classes, my lessons, or my teaching skills — and I never will be. I am eager to improve, to be a better teacher tomorrow than I am today, and better next semester than I am this one. This drive fuels my work as a teacher, as a writer and as a researcher. And, since I expect my students to follow suit, it is the drive that shapes my philosophy of teaching as well.

My approach to teaching is centered on a simple-sounding but infinitely difficult goal: when students leave my classroom at the end of the semester, they do so as different people than when they entered it. How that manifests itself depends on a number of factors: undoubtedly, who the student is and what skills, needs, or goals she has brought with her to the classroom. Perhaps the student will leave having finally mastered commas — or simply gained the confidence to stop offering, unsolicited, that he is a terrible writer. Maybe the student will leave having gained the skills and temperament to become a more effective communicator. The student might leave with a better understanding of how our media environs shape us and how media operate in order to better understand — and, yes, think critically about — her mediated world. At the very least, the student may leave finally having understood that a deadline is not merely a suggestion. To accomplish any of this, I see effective feedback as the fulcrum and keep it central in my approach to students.

These are obviously objectives I want for every student with whom I work — to think deeply, to write better, to believe in himself, and to gain the skills to succeed in college and in life. Yet, I am not naive enough to think it happens for every student, nor am I going to belittle your intelligence to imply that it does. In the classroom, I try to meet each student where he or she is in the educational journey and provide them with actionable feedback to be able to improve. For some, a little progress is the best you can hope for, but it is progress nonetheless. Others, I seek to push to their limits and skills in order to expand them. For all, I want my classroom to be a welcoming place, and I am boisterous and affable in front of the class. I value an effective lecture but in many classes strive to foster an atmosphere where discussion and contribution are the driving forces of class discovery. Especially in upper-level courses, I seek to facilitate rather than dictate, allowing for a diversity of viewpoints and for active learning to take root. Through all my courses, I impress upon my students that I expect much of them and seek to create a culture where accepting the minimum or settling for mediocrity is not the norm.

I believe strongly that learning must happen as much outside the classroom as in it. Not just in the form of group projects or assigned readings but in developing ownership of ideas, techniques, principles, and attitudes by engaging with them in a hands-on fashion. If I only ever worked with students in the confines of the classroom I would be sending a terrible message about the limited nature and applicability of learning. This is why, I spend considerable time to out-of-class mentoring students, both individually and through co-curricular activities. As the faculty lead for the journalism program at Waynesburg and Baldwin Wallace, I've committed much of my week to advising the student newspaper above and beyond my class times. There is nothing that can replicate the value of experiential learning and so I am devoted to providing a comprehensive learning lab through student media like the newspaper, television and radio stations, online platforms and whatever new format becomes hot tomorrow.

I began this statement of teaching philosophy by telling you what I am not; I'd like to end it with what I hope to be: a better teacher — better tomorrow than I am today and better next semester than this one. It's the same expectation I have for my students: to improve — usually not in spurts or huge chunks but incrementally and, importantly, perpetually.