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Teaching Philosophy

I bring my “self” into the classroom. I bring my analytical skills, my knowledge, my irrationality, my ability to read and synthesize vast amounts of complex material, my prejudices, my percipience, my discipline, my penchant to mix and mangle metaphors, and my annoying traits. “Do you know,” my husband asks in exasperation, “how often you stop in the middle of a sentence and start over and how hard this makes it to follow what you’re saying?” I trip over certain words repeatedly. I frequently get students’ names mixed up. I get carried away when a student asks an unexpected question and talk excitedly for 20 minutes before I realize I’ve lost every student in the class. I have to remind myself they don’t care so much about why a central bank should be independent or what economist completed the mathematical model of revealed preference theory. Even taking into account the philosophical and Buddhist difficulties of defining self, still, myself is all I really have to offer my students. Isn’t that all any of us has to offer? Given that, the question becomes, what about me is useful to my students. It’s hard to know most of the time. A student says to me, “Now I read and understand the economics and business news.” Another works for a bank and tells a colleague of mine, “I learned everything I needed to know in April’s Money and Banking class.” That’s straightforward. Sometimes it’s a story about their personal development; “You and X were the professors who really turned me on or helped me grow up.” But, there’s also a student who told me her sister had told her to take my class, “She said you wear cool shoes.” A whole semester of principles condensed down to my shoe preferences. Who knows, maybe she just needed to know it’s okay for a woman to wear comfortable shoes?

One problem with self is that my ego can get in the way of my students’ learning very quickly and easily. The best way to deal with this is to make sure I’m engaged, that I’m all “here, now, in the moment,” in the classroom. Much of teaching is scary as well as hard work. From my stage fright the first week of classes to the fear of making a fool of myself to the difficulty of bringing myself—to expose myself—in front of all these people I barely know; it’s scary. But, it’s the same thing, only worse, for my students. Teaching and learning are often scary, uncomfortable and challenging.

Some things I’ve learned. Doing more—more content, more assignments, more pedagogy or more projects—is not necessarily better. If it’s too much work for me, it’s probably too much work for my students as well. Leave time to think, time to grow, time to have fun in the classroom. Keep a relaxed attitude. It’s not like we’re surgeons and our students are bleeding in front of us. What’s the worst I can do—bore them? Try to keep students from taking it all too seriously. I tell students, “No-one outside of academia after your first job will ever ask you what your GPA was.” Each of us has to figure out which of the numerous pedagogical tools and techniques will work for us some of the time; some days, nothing works. There is no magic formula. There are 35 people looking at me with nothing working, I still have 20 minutes of class time and someone has fallen asleep. This is why I need to be well prepared, and I remind myself, each of them has a life as well

and maybe, the one asleep was up late last night taking their roommate to the hospital. Sometimes a movie is just fine.

Be prepared to be comfortable with chaos. The process of learning is often not clear, linear or organized. No matter how much I've read about learning, there are days when students are in groups discussing something and I'm not sure if they're on task or if it's useful. I keep concluding, over and over again, that they're learning more if they're talking about the subject than if I'm talking. Sometimes those "teachable moments" happen when I'm really prepared and sometimes they happen when I'm caught off-base and winging it. They've never happened when I have a fever or bad cold so those days I should learn to just go home and get in bed. Maybe, I'm a slow learner. Students need to be touched and so do teachers, and yes, I mean physically. For a long time I didn't touch students, ever, but as I've aged and read on the topic, we humans need to touch each other. I'm careful about how and when I do it and it's easier for me as I am a small woman, i.e., generally considered non-threatening, and old enough to be considered asexual, at least by my students.

Teaching is a communal activity. I am better because my colleagues are better and we talk to each other and share ideas and support. Different students will "click" with different ones of us, depending on their learning and our teaching styles and personalities. In teaching we're all connected—students, teacher, colleagues.

If anything, my teaching philosophy is more amorphous and vague now than when I first started teaching. Once, I heard an educator say when she first started teaching it was all about content, then about pedagogy, and finally, about students. I'm in that third stage. What I think about most is who's in my class. I read over the class lists ahead of time. Who are they as individuals? What will the group dynamics be? How will they learn? How can I/will I engage them? So much of learning is motivation, theirs and mine. Each group is different. Not one class in 36 semesters has ever been quite the same. Group dynamics matter a lot and for all the techniques I've learned about group work and participation, much of it I can't control. But, anytime I think I'm in control of anything in the classroom, I'm mistaken. A lot of learning takes place one-on-one with students, before or after class, or when you're talking to a small group stuck on a particular problem or outside of class altogether and I don't quite know how to create more of these situations. The hardest is when I've got a group I just can't connect with.

At fifty, as a full professor and after over twenty years of teaching, I have enough power. I have both "power over" and "power of specialized knowledge and expertise" in the classroom. I also have power because of my class, race, the country I was born in, and my family and friends' status and resources. My job is to empower my students, the only way power won't corrupt me too much. I want to empower and not marginalize any of them; there's no formula for doing this. I go back to the best I can do is to bring my self into the classroom and be present and open to them and to the chaos of that moment.

The punch line to some comedy skit I no longer remember went, "You don't know much and that's a fact." That's true for me as well as my students. Knowledge is like concentric circles; I'm on a circle further out than my students, knowing much more than they do. Yet, they could list just a handful of things they don't know about economics while I

could list pages. My dissertation chair said to me, “A PhD is to teach you how much you don’t know about a subject.” Remembering how much I still have to learn helps keep me engaged in teaching. Over the years I have learned far more and grown more from my students than any of them have from me and am humbled and grateful. I get paid for what I do so technically that makes me a professional, however, I still feel like an amateur. On my good days, I play for the love of the game.