Teaching Philosophy

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I believe the ultimate goal of teaching is sharing my passion for learning and discovery with my students and sharing what I have learned about teaching with other teachers and researchers. In the words of William A. Ward, “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.” My philosophy explains how I teach, why I teach, and what I have contributed to teaching within the departments I have served at this point in my career. I truly aspire to be a great teacher.

I view teaching as an art and seek to learn as much about my craft as possible. As I learn, I attempt to emulate master teachers, apply new concepts, grow from previous experiences, and improve my creativity in each course I teach. Through my teaching, study and mentorship, I have developed a list of imperatives for exemplary teaching and successful class dynamics: these have formed the basis for my philosophy of teaching. As a result, I will explain how selected elements are embodied within my courses and how students perceive my classes.

Passion
I have a passion for teaching, for my students and for the field of recreation. Within the courses I teach, I feel a responsibility to prepare students for their future professional aspirations in recreation. I hope to prepare my students to be the young recreation leaders of tomorrow. One way I help students make the transition from student to professional is to formulate course assignments and policies to mimic job-related tasks. I am motivated by the achievements of my students and feel that I have truly done my job when they evidence deep learning through job success. I feel I played an indelible part in that process.

Student Comment: (REC 3010, Spring 2009): “I love the teacher’s attitude and interaction with the class. She brought the subject matter to life, and she was always very helpful. I enjoyed her lectures and stories.

Student Comment: (REC 3530, Spring 2007): “This was a great class and a wonderful hands on learning experience. Dr. Gray was always enthusiastic and encouraging in class. The experience of her class was an amazing adventure. I’ve never had a professor that teaches in such a way that you learn something new everyday.”

Teaching Style
I strongly believe in using the “discussion” technique in my classes to facilitate student engagement and interaction. I constantly ask students to answer thought-provoking questions and/or provide their personal views and examples during class lecture. Thought-provoking questions may include student’s beliefs about keeping score in youth programs, or questions regarding inclusion and discrimination issues. I feel that when the students are involved, they comprehend and learn the material better. I make a concerted effort to make every class fun and interesting. Recently, I utilized a behavior style questionnaire in class to demonstrate how to relate to potential clients by understanding behavior styles. In this exercise, students were placed into groups based on their own style and then asked to relate to a student of an opposite style. After this class, a student sent an email to express how much he enjoyed the lecture and class interaction that day. In subsequent classes, the students have referred to one other as particular ‘behavior styles’. Seeing students draw links between one class discussion and the next indicates that the atmosphere I have created is a productive learning environment.
Experiential Learning and Exceeding Expectations

Experiential learning is essential to our profession. Through this method of teaching, students often push themselves farther than they could have imagined. More importantly, students retain the information. I was able to see evidence of the power of experiential learning in my recreation programming course as we planned and implemented the MTSU “Battle of the Bands” and the Tour de Boro. During the project students would complain about the challenges of the event; however, afterwards many of the students commented how much they learned from the experience. The 2nd Annual Tour de Boro proved to be better than the previous both in design and execution. Specifically, the first year the students raised $1000 for RLS students with this event: the second year they raised $3000. Students took great pride in this project and continue to use the skills they learned. I was overwhelmed with the results of the students’ creativity and the evidence of learning that occurred. The greatest achievement I can attain as a teacher is to help my students find direction, meaning, and personal satisfaction in their careers.

Classroom Atmosphere and Student Connection

I believe my students can clearly see that I love teaching. I strive to create a comfortable learning atmosphere for my students by sharing my professional experiences, my mistakes, my successes, and what I learned from each of them. My teaching style tends to be discussion-focused: I believe this stimulates an interactive class and fosters student learning. I begin each Marketing class with a quick discussion of “the good, the bad and the ugly.” Students excitedly bring in marketing campaigns they found effective or non-effective and the class discusses these in relation to marketing strategies learned in previous class meetings. I firmly believe that students learn best when the atmosphere is fun.

I strive to demonstrate to my students that I care about them as individuals, about their academic progress, and about their futures. Teaching goes far beyond the classroom. When students realize that a teacher cares about them, many will invest in the class and their learning. As one portion of my commitment, I create course websites for all of my classes. These websites contain: the course schedule, lectures, syllabus, descriptions of individual assignments, grading rubrics, course grade book, and resources links (APA format, common student errors in writing, and career links). Students have expressed that the course websites facilitate learning through ease of access and organization of materials. Actively listening is another way I show students that I take an interest in what they think and feel. I make it clear that I will make time for students both in and outside of the classroom, especially through effective email correspondence. I check and respond to emails several times every day. It is also important to demonstrate an approachable and fair demeanor.
Personal relevance increases student comprehension and retention; therefore, I strive to make a personal connection with the class and students. I believe this rapport creates a more conducive learning environment, which allows me to push my students to exceed their previous expectations.

Student Comment: (REC 4550, Spring 2010): “I have learned so much in each one of your classes. I feel like you really make it a priority for us to understand the material. I cannot express enough how much you have made my college experience wonderful and worthwhile. Thanks for being so easily accessible for the students to reach you. Overall you are an excellent professor and the students can tell that you really do care about what you do.”

Student Comment: (REC 4110 Fall 2007): “Dr. Gray is an amazing teacher; She works with her students more than all the other teachers I have had; I really appreciate her approach to school; Would highly recommend her to any future student; I enjoyed this class and strongly think that it should be required for all students who are going to be teachers or coaches; This class has good information and should be stressed to coaches of youth sports.”

Challenging the Student

Though I do demonstrate a genuine concern for students they are also aware that I set high academic standards. It is common knowledge among my students that my exams are “hard”. I believe that true learning can only occur when students are challenged to strive for their full potential. I intend to provide my students with opportunities to try, succeed, fail, improve, and learn. It is not uncommon for my students to compete in assignments such as major presentations or projects. In my marketing course as my students work on their marketing plans, they compete to become the most innovative and creative. I am proud when they glow with pride as they enthusiastically present their material. It is here that I can truly see that they have experienced the Constructivist ‘ah ha’.

Student Comment: (REC 3530, Spring 2008): This class was one, if not the best classes I have taken at MTSU. I found it to be a very involved class with a rewarding end result. Dr. Gray is also an amazing teacher, and always willing to help you out in whatever way you need. This is my second class that I have taken with her, and I have found that I have learned so much. She has been an amazing mentor.”

Student Comment: (REC 3010, Fall 2008): “The class was informative and interesting. The teacher was fair, but was not afraid to expect a lot from us as students. This class will make anyone fall in love with the aspects of recreation.”

Student Comment: (REC 3530, Spring 2007): “This class was a hard class to teach, especially when facilitators need extreme motivation. I’ve enjoyed working with Dr. Gray to program this event. This class challenged me very much. Likewise, I have learned much.”

Striving for Teaching Excellence

I hope to become a master teacher one day, but to do so I must constantly evaluate my teaching skills and improve upon them by seeking peer reviews, attending workshops and staying abreast of the current literature. I evaluate my teaching in several ways: student feedback, soliciting both formal and informal student feedback, self-reflection after every class to include a journal, and both formal and informal peer evaluations. Using these methods, I have learned that students enjoy interaction and real-life case studies. I also attend teaching workshops, actively participate in the SPRE Teaching Institute each year, and secured a faculty development grant to take a youth development certification course. Another important resource for improving my teaching is to observe master teachers. I have learned a great deal from observing skilled teachers, such as the art of silence. I have incorporated this valuable tool in my courses. Students are uncomfortable with silence and will attempt to participate in discussion or answer questions when silence lasts longer than a few seconds.
I realize some students are not as comfortable with the “discussion” style I typically utilize. I continue to explore alternative methods of teaching such as the use of in-class group activities. The ‘behavior styles’ exercise in Marketing, as previously mentioned is an example of my success in utilizing an alternative teaching method. I witnessed several ‘quiet’ students engaging more during this activity and nodding their heads in agreement during the explanation of concepts.

Student Comment: (REC 6510, Spring 2008): “I appreciate the enthusiasm that Dr. Gray brings to the subject matter. Her real-world examples are pertinent and help to explain what we are learning in class. While the class project is intensive, it is also incredibly practical and applicable to professional development. It will be a solid piece in my professional portfolio.”

Student Comment: (REC 4110, Fall 2007): “Loved this class; Learned a lot about youth programming; Dr. Gray has a fantastic teaching style and is willing to adapt if she sees it’s not the best for her students; She is willing to do whatever it takes to make sure her students learn and understand the material.”

Student Comment: (REC 3520, Fall 2008): “Teaches very well/Appeals to everyone learning styles/Energetic”

**Teaching and Research: One Feeds the Other**

I believe that being an effective teacher also entails being a strong researcher; thus, my two lines of research foster my teaching. My pedagogical line provides insight of pedagogical issues, new discoveries in the area, and strengthens my teaching. For example, understanding the learning styles of students will assist in my delivery of material. Additionally, my recent study on grading practices and grade inflation directly influenced changes within the department where the research was conducted. As a result of my data: the school added a required core course in teaching for doctoral students and implement supervision (mentorship) protocol for all graduate students and adjunct faculty who are teaching. I am pleased that my study was seamlessly incorporated into useful action, as I seek that all of my research be efficacious in “real life”. My youth development line feeds current knowledge of community recreation both for practioners and my students. Recently, practioners have indicated a need for young professions to have skills and certifications relating to youth sport. In an effort to meet this need I designed a Youth Sport Course that focuses on youth development within sport. To ensure our students have the adequate knowledge of working with youth, I included a broad foundation of youth development in the course (eg. developmental stages of youth). Additionally, parents and coaches are a central focus when interacting with community youth programs; I included a section about successfully working with parents and coaches. For example, one way to hold parents and coaches accountable is to require educational sessions and to sign a ‘code of conduct’. Parents and coaches need opportunities for education about rules, agency policies and youth sport participation issues. Because certifications help students secure future positions in our field by providing a competitive edge, the youth sport course I designed provides students with a coach’s certification.

**Summary**

I believe that great teachers inspire students to achieve. I am fortunate to have been encouraged by an excellent group of mentors at this point in my career, and I aspire to pass along my love of learning to others. My teaching philosophy is propelled by my desire to galvanize recreation students into lifelong learners. Recreation is a field I am passionate to learn, research and improve, and I will strive to use the latest and best methods available to pass along my enthusiasm to each student I have the opportunity to reach.