

Teaching Philosophy and Motivation

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"In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it." -- Michelangelo

For as long as I can remember, I have been keenly aware of the "lovely apparitions" or the finest manifestations of those around me. I have always been able to view the hindrances of skill deficiencies, class inequity and family concerns as but the excess marble obfuscating one's potential. I view teaching, then, as an art as well as a craft. With every skill I impart and paradigm I shift, I seek to remove a bit of the rough walls surrounding my students, exposing them to truth, beauty and their own incandescence.

I also understand, however, that self-actualization is but one of the tools my students will need to be impactful in a global economy. Members of the Creative Class, an ever-evolving group of professionals whose greatest marketable skill is the ability to innovate, comprise forty percent of the workforce of the top fourteen most prosperous countries. As antiquated as the American three-martini lunch and ashtray at the office, hierarchical and traditional structures have proved ineffectual in not only coping with, but seizing upon, the only certainty we can rely on: change. Future leaders in all fields must understand how to collaborate and communicate multilaterally, interculturally and synergistically. They must channel multiple types of intelligences within themselves and others in order to thrive in careers that have yet to be invented. It is essential, then, that educators relentlessly cultivate, rather than undermine, the creativity inherent within students.

And yet, in most conventional schools, being wrong is about the worst thing a student can be. Education reformer Sir Ken Robinson argues that "we don't grow into creativity, we grow out of it. Or rather, we get educated out of it." Instead of viewing trial and error to be as magnificent a force as it is torturous, traditional teaching methods are driven by empty terms such as "achievement" and "success." All too often, these notions of "mastery" correlate to the best of four answers, a path of least resistance crippling to those who will soon be called upon to generate answers and pioneer solutions that cannot be found at the back of the book. The English teacher most able to activate those who will inherit both the innovations as well as ravages of our and prior generations must know how to conduct as well as instruct. She must command interpersonal as well as linguistic intelligence. She must be able to ignite the various passions of various personalities. A forward-thinking educator must be meta-cognitive in her ability to think critically, logically and creatively and, most importantly, she must know how to impart these habits of mind in her students. These dictates are what I stand for as a teacher of literature. In each lesson I design and execute, I seek to get ever closer to these ideals.

Accordingly, I am motivated to pursue a position with an independent school that similarly views teaching as an art form in addition to a series of well-orchestrated steps and strategies. I desire to work within a learning environment in which I am trusted to make instructional decisions that best benefit students. Specifically, I aim to employ two pedagogies that I have found to be the most engaging and effective means to prepare students for leadership in college and career:

1) Socratic Questioning: This approach to classroom pedagogy stems from the adage, “Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand.” The teacher’s role is to model higher-order thought, lead discussion, scaffold questioning, guide the student to his or her own well-reasoned conclusions and eventually participate as an equal in student-driven seminar. Thus, inquiry spurs intellectual curiosity, refines social intelligence and develops the skill of discernment needed to evaluate conflicting arguments. Ultimately, the teacher serves as both a source of inspiration as well as the catalyst in the creation of habits of thought that activate the quest for knowledge throughout life.

2) Collaborative Learning: Many subtle components comprise a culture of critical thinking and collective argumentation. Students are most able to take risks in their writing, solve problems creatively, collaborate rather than compete, and engage in non-linear thinking when all other needs are being met consistently. A foundational classroom culture of safety, belonging and confidence is essential to collaboration and risk-taking. The crafting of such a classroom environment is a meticulous process and is a cornerstone of my practice. Of all the pedagogies I have studied, I have found that a well-executed Collaborative Learning approach is best able to foster transformative discussions about literature. In July 2011, I attended the Kagan Summer Institute and immediately saw the potential of collaborative learning to refine thinking, presentation and processing skills. In practicing only a dozen of the over 200 structures, I have witnessed collaborative learning prepare students for the type of teamwork essential to the Conceptual Age. Along the way, these approaches have instilled values of empathy, community, humor and other elements crucial to good character.

Perhaps most importantly, both the Socratic and Collaborative approaches have created a classroom independently brimming with life. I often feel as but a part of a collective hive of vibrating synapses, igniting to fuse new connections and cut fresh pathways. My students are engaged and our learning is never passive.

For more reasons than I can count, my greatest satisfaction lies in inspiring self-actualization through support, self-exploration and creativity. Since entering my first classroom, I have been unable to tell where “teacher” ends and I begin. I teach because from the moment I wake up to the moment I pass out with a stack of papers, I rarely find myself thinking about anything else.