

Personal Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Method

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The other day, my students spent the entire class period of UHON 204 *Individual & Collective* writing a play about Karl Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. They shuttled back and forth between groups to make sure that the end of Act I would work with the beginning of Act II, and sharing exciting ideas that they wanted to make sure to incorporate into each section. They consulted the *Manifesto*, quoting directly or summarizing in their own words. They modeled for each other how to fully engage with the text, figuring out how to synthesize material into a different medium. And yes, they did come to ask me questions – How do you want us to do this part? Can we use props? – and I helped them puzzle through questions about the content but since I give them carte blanche in the assignment, they ultimately turned back to each other to figure out for themselves how to develop and articulate their ideas. Most importantly, though, they giggled, and struggled, and debated, finding the joy in the challenge of engaging deeply with new concepts. They became deeply engrossed in a text written over 150 years ago, making connections, asking questions, seeking answers, and building a strong foundation for the rest of the course.

People learn best “when they are intensely involved in their own education” (Howard 2015: 4). But we don't need the abundance of available evidence to know that active learning and student engagement facilitates learning. We see it in our classrooms when discussion takes off as students debate the finer point of a text. We see it when students learn from each other. We see it when a light bulb goes off for students who experience for themselves what we've discussed in class, when students want to continue building, thinking, and discussing even after the class period ends. And beyond these sparks in the classroom, we see it as our students' assignments improve over the semester, in their deepening ability to engage with course materials. **Getting students actively, intensely, involved in their own learning is central to my teaching.**

But how? First, I see the classroom as a collaborative space, a community we build together as co-learners. Second, I value learning opportunities that are experiential, embodied, and relevant. And third, I build student-directed learning into my classes to the greatest extent possible. These pedagogical commitments fit, somewhat imperfectly, onto the hopes I have for my students: I want my students to engage with the world around them as confident knowledge producers, as life-long learners, and as collaborative problem-solvers; I want my students to take the learning from my classroom into the rest of their lives, and to see how the skills, practices and ideas debated are relevant, useful, and interesting within their own personal and professional trajectory; and I want my students to be able to solve problems, and to rise to new and uncertain tasks with an arsenal of ideas, connections, and skills even if they've never used those tools in that way before. Finally, I want my students to feel good about their learning; I want them to experience the joy of intellectual engagement and the satisfaction of thinking critically and creatively to solve problems. This is no small task, but if I want my students to do a lot, I need similarly scaled goals for myself as well.

Classroom Community

College is a social environment, especially for the young people that make up the majority of our students. I see that my students are motivated by social goals in addition to intellectual ones: they want to form relationships and be socially responsible (see McKeachie and Svinicki 2006). These goals enter into the classroom as well, and I believe we do well to take them seriously and incorporate them into our teaching strategies. These social motivations can help students more deeply engage in the class and class materials, can help students develop confidence as a learner and producer of knowledge, and can help build the foundations for lifelong learning and collaborative problem solving. In my classroom, I seek to build a classroom community where students see themselves as co-learners and they share the initiative and responsibility for their own

learning and that of their peers. Here, teaching and learning are reciprocal and students have the opportunity to engage in both in order to deepen their understanding of course concepts. The social motivations students bring are harnessed to meet the academic goals I have for them.

I begin each semester with activities to build this classroom community. In nearly all of my first classes we do a getting-to-know-you icebreaker where students have to work together, sometimes struggling together, to remember and repeat every student's name and an interesting class-related fact about them. It feels awkward and challenging, but the premise is that we work together to accomplish the task – getting to know each other but more importantly establishing the norm of collaborative and shared responsibility for learning. Getting to know each other and becoming comfortable with the social environment in the classroom helps students feel confident and safe in the classroom, which contributes to their ability to participate and become involved (see Howard 2015). Students are more willing and able to take risks when they feel safe, when they can rely on their peers to accept their contributions without judgment, and when they help each other refine ideas, evaluate evidence, and explore their growing knowledge. In my classes, students spend considerable time working collaboratively, learning from each other, and sharing ideas with each other. This is important because I want my students to see themselves as producers of knowledge, not just passive recipients. When they can teach each other, or share the struggle of discovery, then we build together the foundation for life-long engagement in our own learning. Students must have this confidence, even trust in each other, to be open to these possibilities.

My commitment to building a classroom community is based in feminist pedagogies that rethink the nature of knowledge to generate equity and empowerment of students (Crabtree and Sapp 2003). My feminist pedagogy is about democratizing the classroom; I seek to integrate my students' diverse experiences into the learning process. Thus, focusing on building a classroom community means being inclusive of student diversity and also using student experiences and knowledge as a foundation for shared learning. This builds confidence when students feel seen, heard, and recognized for the unique perspectives that they bring to our shared learning project.

Experiential Learning

In one of my classes, *Food & Society* (UHON 302-007), I teach a unit on food insecurity in the United States. We read USDA reports that detail an 11% rate of food insecurity in the US as a whole, and 18% food insecurity in our own state. We read the latest research about the high incidence of food insecurity among college students, and how being hungry impacts students' likelihood of academic success, their health and wellbeing, and even their risk of suicide. Then, to make these statistics real, I conduct the USDA's food security assessment in my class, with students responding to the 10 questions about their own access to food. After taking this survey, I randomly hand back to each student one of their peer's (anonymous) responses. We go outside, and I again read each question from the assessment out loud. If the survey response that a student is holding is positive (meaning, a positive indicator of food insecurity), s/he steps forward. Thus, we collectively see (and feel in our bodies) the level of food insecurity that exists within our class – of course, without revealing any particular student's experiences. Each and every semester, some students in our class are food insecure. The act of seeing some members of the class step forward, or being one of those students who step forward, somehow brings home the lessons about hunger in America. The embodiment of this knowledge makes it real, more relevant. Experiential learning makes knowledge tangible, it improves comprehension, builds empathy, and motivates students.

Experiential learning can take a lot of different forms, and in my teaching I do it a lot of different ways. On one hand, experiential learning can be very large in scale: it can be full classes, like the summer study abroad courses I lead, or the year-long service-learning class I co-taught with a colleague. But experiential learning can also be small in scale, like taking students on a walk to the Three Peoples Mural in Zimmerman Library to examine the social construction of race.

I'm teaching *Food & Society* this semester, a class that integrates experiential learning very explicitly in a variety of ways but without really leaving the classroom. In addition to activities like the one described above, there are two major assignments in the class that use experiential learning as a means to intensify student involvement. The first is a simple assignment: follow a recipe. Each student creates a dish, then presents it to the class, which gets to both taste the food and learn about it, how to make it, and its historical, political or social importance. This type of assignment combines my commitments to collaborative and experiential learning. The second key experiential assignment in this class is the SNAP Challenge. In this assignment, students are challenged to abide by a food budget of just \$4.50 a day, the amount provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – the flagship food assistance program of the federal government. Through several preparatory activities, students develop strategies, share experiences, and reflect on the challenge. They are graded not on their success at sticking to this budget but on the personal and intellectual journey that this challenge takes them through. This assignment is accompanied by readings, other media, and discussion about food insecurity in the United States, New Mexico, and on college campuses, and thus the experience of the SNAP Challenge helps students understand the connections between the politics and policies related to food assistance, the demographic and other patterns of food insecurity, and the realities of experiencing such challenges. Modes of learning that are experiential, embodied, and relevant to students motivate them towards open-ended inquiry that continues on beyond the classroom.

Student Directed

Being “intensely involved” in one’s own learning requires that professors give space to students’ ideas and efforts, allowing them room to shape what they learn and how they learn it. Students need direction, of course, but they also need space to make the learning their own. And while uncertainty is hard for the students raised in a time of standardized testing and “no child left behind”, they learn more when they have to grapple with material or a challenging assignment. And, they put more effort into a project if they care about it and see it as relevant in their own lives. This openness and uncertainty creates opportunities for creativity and innovation.

A simple way to cede direction to students is to allow them to choose their own topics for their assignments. In my class *Individual and Collective: Understanding Social Change* (UHON 204), I build what is essentially a social theory class around current events that the students care about. They select a contemporary social issue that they care deeply about, initially just presenting it to the class and describing it in a short paper. After we spend the semester studying social theory, students then focus in their last assignment on applying the theories they’ve learned in class to understand, explain, and generate solutions to the social issue that they care about. It works well because students must of course have a deep comprehension of the theory to synthesize and apply them to a new problem, and it makes the theory deeply relevant to what they care about. I also often integrate student presentation of their work and ideas into the class so that students can learn from each-other. It allows all students to see and hear about different ways to approach the same problem, and allows them to recognize themselves as producer of knowledge as they teach new ideas to others. Students also direct class when they shape the discussions we have. Nearly all of my class time is given over to students’ active engagement with materials. I create space for this in some instances by “flipping” the classroom to introduce content outside of class so we can focus on active engagement in class. In my *Individual & Collective* class, for instance, I minimize lecture about social theory by asking students to prepare by listening to select podcasts alongside their reading of primary texts. (Drawing upon diverse instructional methods and media also has the benefit of inclusion for students who learn in different ways.) Creating open-ended spaces for exploration means that the class sometimes goes in novel or unexpected ways – a risk for me as the teacher, of course, but not greater than the risks I want my students to accept as they take the reins and responsibility for their own learning.

Assessment, Evaluation, and Continued Growth as a Teacher

How do I know that my strategies are working and if and when students meet these goals? On one hand, these goals I've set out above are intangible, they are bigger than my course objectives and student learning outcomes. But I can see classes become communities as students develop relationships and even particular classroom cultures. I watch students become more confident in their ability to critically read and discuss texts, and apply ideas from across the semester to solve particular problems. I ask students to reflect verbally in class on their experiential learning and hear how moving, exciting, and instructive it can be. In addition to such intangible evidence, in much of my assessment of student work I take an approach inspired by Peter Elbow (2008) who advocates for more communication to students when we evaluate their work. I am strongly committed to formative rather than simply summative evaluation, and I use an analytical grid similarly to that suggested by Elbow to provide feedback so students can continue to learn even after the assignment is completed. This grid lists the criteria I have asked students to focus on in the assignment, and allows me to easily note whether their work in this regard is excellent, just okay, or in need of improvement. I couple this grid and its consistent criteria, with a more open-ended set of comments and evaluations that helps students know more about what they can improve in future assignments.

I take a similar approach to evaluate the class. On one hand, I ask students about their experiences with particular activities and assignments to see if it prompted the kinds of connections, reflections, and learning outcomes I had intended. I also try to regularly keep a reflections log in which I make note of these student reactions and also what I notice about different activities and assignments. At the end of the semester, in addition to the IDEA form evaluations, I survey students to get more focused feedback about what worked, what didn't, what they liked, and what they think could be improved. I use these different sets of feedback to revise my courses every semester, updating reading lists, or expanding or removing units, or revising or changing assignments.

I always learn from my students, and I take their ideas and feedback seriously as I continue to grow as a teacher and refine my own pedagogies and courses. Other ways that I grow as a teacher is through engagement with my colleagues, reflection on the pedagogy literature, and in teaching discussions at conferences and on-campus events sponsored by our Center for Teaching Excellence. One new strategy that I am exploring in my teaching is transparency about my own journey as a student and learner. This is prompted by an observation of heightened anxiety and fear of failure amongst my students (and also the student population at large, see Twenge 2017). I am exploring talking about my own experiences as a first-generation college student, of imposter syndrome, and as someone who makes mistakes and fails many times before I succeed. I want to see if this helps my students cope with the risks they have to take in my class and in college more broadly, and if it will allow them to overcome their paralyzing fear of failure. I have also joined with my Honors colleagues in a longer-term discussion about how to encourage creativity, risk-taking, and the true grappling with difficult materials or challenges that we hope for our students. Thus, one of my goals for my own growth as a teacher is to become better at helping my students take risks in their own learning, to accept uncertainty, and to recognize the struggle and hard work of academic life as personally beneficial and worthwhile.

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