



# Teaching Philosophy

*Hwæt! It is the first word of the most famous Old English text of all time – Beowulf – and is a word that, in itself, has no intrinsic meaning other than as a way of signaling to an audience that a story is about to begin. This assembled portfolio is my story presented to you, and it begins here, with my teaching philosophy.*

A university may train teachers in particular pedagogical practices – how to organize lesson plans, for instance, or how to establish a grading rubric. Training can transform a student into a teacher, but cannot compensate for those personal attributes that a teacher must bring to her own classroom in order to make it the best possible place in which learning may occur.

One of the most important attributes that a teacher can bring to her profession is leadership, which should not be confused with mere discipline. To me, leadership means leading by example, approaching the work at hand with enthusiasm and real intellectual curiosity and, in the process, providing a model for my students to do the same. Leadership means making it clear to my students that there is no place I would rather be than in this classroom, working with them; that what we are doing is important and that we each have significant contributions that we can make to this particular body of knowledge. Because I view leadership in this light does not mean that I do not believe in a disciplined classroom, however. I believe that we need enough order in the classroom to facilitate the learning process, while allowing just enough chaos to encourage creative thinking. Discipline begins with a well-developed syllabus, outlining what I expect of my students and what they, in turn, can expect of me. Assignments, due-dates and class expectations should be clearly stated within the syllabus and then followed as closely as the reality of the semester permits, providing a flexible framework for our exploration of the subject matter at hand.

Another important attribute is empathy toward my students. It is important for me to see my students as individuals, young men and women who may or may not be ecstatic at the prospect of joining me on this particular intellectual journey. When teaching literature, for instance, I must remember that, regardless of my own enthusiasm for the subject, there will always be those who do not share my passion for literature, in which case it is my responsibility to help them find their own path toward the texts under consideration, to discover the relevance of the literature to them as an individual. Only in the personal contact between student and text can any real excitement begin to develop. I help facilitate this contact by taking a multi-faceted approach toward the literature, looking at it through various theoretical lenses as well as grounding it in the historical, economic, and social framework of its construction, thereby giving the students a sense of the multitude of approaches that one may take toward a given text. Also, the impact of the classroom experience upon the student/text relationship cannot be overstated. Students need to feel that they are respected members of the class, that their opinions and suggestions are given due consideration and are received in the spirit with which they are offered. There are those instructors who argue that one can learn more through discomfort than comfort and through confrontation rather than confirmation. I am not one of those instructors. I believe that comfort promotes confidence and encourages dialogue, prompting students to participate in the discussion and the work of the class. I consider it of utmost importance that the students take an active role in their own education, because it is my firm belief that passivity leads to nothing but boredom. Lecturing to the class is important to introduce new concepts but

is, in my opinion, the least effective method of producing new knowledge. Students need to actively participate in their education in order to experience any real sense of investment in it.

A third attribute is a sense of humor. My humor stems from the delight that I feel for the subject matter, the students, and for the learning/teaching process as a whole. Certainly, some days are more delightful than others but, as I said earlier, there is nothing I would rather do and no place that I would rather be. The need for humor is in all of us; it is what links us together and helps us get over the rough patches. Humor allows us to open the gates upon the walls that we have built around ourselves and to let in new possibilities. We may be students and teachers, but we are all, in the end, simply human beings who tend to do what we enjoy, while putting off as long as possible that which we do not enjoy. I would prefer that my students enjoy my class, and humor goes a long way toward creating that enjoyment.

It is important that a teacher be approachable. Students have differing levels of comfort when it comes to speaking to their instructor. Some feel perfectly comfortable asking questions in class, while others prefer the relative anonymity of contacting her electronically through email or online postings. In my literature classes, I make it a point to encourage students to talk to me through weekly class logs submitted via Blackboard. These logs provide a safe place for students to explore ideas and reactions to the work that we are doing in our class, and I always make a point of responding to each and every submission, even if only a few words. Eventually, as they feel more secure in the classroom environment, most of the students become comfortable enough to ask questions in class, reserving e-mail for more personal concerns or for last minute clarification. Creating an attitude of approachability is important to me, particularly since I am one of those students who has always felt awkward about approaching my own instructors. Knowing that I am interested in their questions and concerns helps my students come to trust me as a person and as a teacher, making my job that much easier.

The most important lesson that I can teach my students is to think, to examine the underlying causality of their own opinions and theories as well as those that they encounter throughout the course of their education. I have found that the world is a very black and white place to many of my students, that the great opinion meter has only two settings – either good or bad. Such a dualistic vision does not leave room for the great gray expanse of thoughtful probability that lies between the two extremes. Just as there are many approaches to a given text, there are also many paths toward any given truth. In my philosophy, literature and life have a lot in common.

When the semester is over, I want my students to walk away with more than just the course material; I want them to leave the classroom as thoughtful, curious human beings who take delight in the world around them. I want them to know that, although knowledge is indeed power, it is also a joy to be shared through the symbiotic act of learning and teaching. In the end, I want them, and me, to leave the class better people for having spent the semester together.