

my teaching philosophy ...

My philosophy of teaching draws from several philosophical and research traditions, as well as from my experiences as a student, educator, and activist.

At my core, I am a constructivist (Peschl, 2006; von Glasersfeld, 2007). That is to say, I believe that facts and technique may be “transmitted” between people; however, each individual must construct understanding and meaning over time. Thus, learning is a deliberate process of meaning-making. A process that inevitably requires students to reflect, question, struggle, and reconcile. Moreover, I am an activist. While the majority of my concerns and efforts have focused on liberation of African-Americans, I am committed to a just and civil society. My declaration and commitment to meaning-making, civility and justice have significant implications for my teaching.

One implication is that I do not “instruct” or tell students what they should know. Rather, I set a safe/civil environment, in which I can facilitate students’ inquiry, discussions, practice, and reflection on the subject matter. Note, this does not suggest that lecture, or direct explanation, is sometimes appropriate. However, my role as facilitator is in recognition that students are not empty vessels, but individuals with “significant” experiences that shape their respective sense of purpose (Dewey, 1938; Friere, 1970, Telda, 1996). Therefore, I seek to construct opportunities for students to engage the subject matter in ways that challenge one’s preconceptions, “wrestles” with one’s biases, and formulate strategies consistent with one’s values and ideals.

Subsequently, communication cannot be taken for granted. All communication involves the sending of symbols that have no inherent meaning; meaning is intended by the sender and inferred by the recipient, and what meaning the recipient infers depends on his or her pre-existing expectations, assumptions, model of the sender, knowledge, and so on (Sebeok, 1994; Vygotsky, 1962). Thus, as a teacher, I cannot presume my students will interpret my “spectacularly clear explanations” as I intended. First, we must agree upon a common set of meanings on which we can build relationship (rapport) and increasingly more complex meanings and higher cognitive functioning (Banduar, 1986; Kenyatta, 1962; Sebeok, 1994; Vygotsky, 1962). Then, I need to model their interpretations as they model my intentions, and I need to “close the loop”, asking them to communicate back to me what they think they understood. Moreover, Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development, suggests that I must continually adjust the learning environment to accommodate students’

evolving understandings and competencies; erecting and dismantling “scaffolding” to bridge the “zone” between old meaning and new meaning.

Another implication is the underlying intention of my teaching. Regardless of the subject matter, my intent is to equip students to challenge oppression and do justice. My intention is informed by many scholars and activist that include:

W.E.B. DuBois (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*
Carter G. Woodson (1933) *The Mis-education of the Negro*
Martin L. King Jr. (1963) *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*
(1968) *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*
Steve Biko (1978) *I Write What I Like*
Mwalimu J. Shujaa (1994) *Too Much Schooling, Not Enough Education*
Cornel West (2004) *Democracy Matters*
Michael Sandel (2009) *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?*.

From this perspective, I believe self-examination (in the tradition of Imhotep, Sun Tzu and Socrates) and justice (in the tradition of Ma’at, Jesus, and Martin Luther King Jr.) are the essential concepts forming the foundation of a “good education.” Therefore, any educative experience must ultimately equip students to critically examine/interrogate the “community of self” (Akbar, 1985) and engage that community to bring about justice (Jacobsen, 2001).

In light of these philosophical perspectives, I understand my duties as a teacher to:

1. Be personally committed to the idea of a good education
2. Know the subject matter and know each student
3. Be a life long learner
4. Create a learning atmosphere: clean room, multimedia (books, pictures, maps, graphs, videos, computers, etc.), discuss various perspectives, seek understanding not just knowledge
5. Read “the lesson” several times until I am clear on six “w’s”
 - a. Who is speaking/Who are the actors?
 - b. What is being said/done?
 - c. Where is it being said/done?
 - d. When is it being said/done?
 - e. To whom it is being spoken/done to?
 - f. Why is it being said/done?
6. Summarize and evaluate my teaching (if I have taught, then students have learned. Likewise, if the students have not learned, then I have not taught.)

7. Understand that as an educator I am working with the “sacred,” for which I am/will be held accountable.

(Adopted from Moses L. Osborne)

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