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My Philosophy of Teaching

Glen T. Martin

Teaching to be effective must be a vocation, a way of life that involves the totality of one's being, not simply a job or even a profession. A teacher is a real agent of effective education in the lives of students to the extent that he or she embodies a living passion for knowledge and understanding. Such a passion for knowledge and understanding cannot be limited to a particular academic specialty, although such a specialty is often at the heart of this passion. For a human being is a whole: a situated life within a situated culture, historical period and world horizon.

Every whole human being integrates the academic focus of his or her learning with all the dimensions of knowledge available in that historical period: art, history, science, literature, philosophy and religion. This is what it means to inspire students with a passion for lifelong learning. They see the living embodiment of this passion in their teacher who often functions as a role model. Undergraduate students are not likely to pursue any single particular academic discipline as a specialty, but they may be inspired with the passion to become an educated, thoughtful lifelong learner and active citizen making a positive contribution to their world.

My philosophy of teaching (influenced by the Radford University *Writing Across the Curriculum Program* and several philosophers of education) can be expressed in terms of these

four fundamental “i” words: *inquiry, interpretation, integration, and imagination.*

Inquiry. Effective learning begins with good questions. The syllabus should address these central questions. Philosophy in particular is concerned with careful, critical thinking, and such thinking is developed in students by making it interesting and relevant to them. The questions should be fundamental and allow students to see clearly the dynamic of penetrating the surface appearances of things through their questions. You teach to the questions and let the students freely think about the issues and the possible answers. The students must be convinced to find out for themselves, not to accept the opinions of others, including those of their teacher.

Interpretation. An introductory education in philosophy has always been about human beings as *discerners and makers of meaning and value.* One asks of an idea or text: “what does it mean to you?” What is your thoughtful, considered response to this issue? Through classroom dialogue (or the dialogue of citizens in a democracy), we work in this way toward deepening our understanding, towards discerning the dynamic of meaning and truth in human life through committed inquiry and mutual respect. In my classes, I routinely assign many non-graded papers, asking students to reflect on and respond to the meaning of texts and ideas. It is essential that this aspect of the courses be non-graded, since they are asked to think freely and independently about questions of meaning and value.

Integration. *Learning must become part of you.* A person for whom teaching is a vocation has a life-long passion for knowledge and understanding and is a person for whom intellectual, spiritual and moral growth are everyday components of life. Learners, for whom teaching and learning has been successful, also become changed in the process of education. They don’t just pass courses, memorize disconnected facts, and receive formal degrees. They integrate their knowledge and understanding and activate their lives for a perpetual quest of greater knowledge and understanding. Real education is about lifelong intellectual, spiritual and moral growth. And one of the best ways to activate this is to directly encounter the central ideas of the great thinkers of the past and present (for example, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Jurgen Habermas) and to understand the relevance of their ideas to our world and our lives today.

Imagination. Real thinking and real teaching cultivate the imagination (just as the arts and the humanities have traditionally cultivated the imagination). Do we want to leave a better world for our children? Can we be lifelong learners who the capacity for critical thought, values

and the vision to become active citizens within a democracy and a world leading toward a better future for humankind? Good teaching cultivates the imagination (just as it cultivates careful questioning and critical thinking) as showing *the possibility of other states of reality*. A cultivated imagination activates good citizenship and prepares students to contribute creatively throughout their lifetimes to their society and their world.

Conclusion. I believe my philosophy of teaching, summarized above, makes it clear that the college classroom is, or should be, a very special place. I try to impress upon my students that what goes on in the classroom is not simply an extension of the day to day routine that goes on in our daily lives. This importance comes through in different ways in each of the courses that I routinely teach:

In *Knowledge and Reality* class, what could be more fundamental than looking at the ways the great thinkers have questioned the everyday appearances of things and opened up a deeper understanding for reality for their readers? In *Philosophy of Language*, what can be more significant than trying to understand that very medium that makes us unique on this planet and is at the heart of all knowledge and communication? In *Origins of Philosophy*, how important it is to understand the emergence of philosophical, scientific and ethical thinking out of the preceding mythological era and to comprehend the relevance of great ancient thinkers such as Socrates and Plato for our own lives. In *Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*, how wonderful it is to understand the pivotal period in western thought (between the ancient and modern worlds), the great cosmological and ethical visions of that period, and the birth of our own (modern) world in the Renaissance. In *Philosophy of Religion*, how extraordinarily fundamental it is to reflect on our human condition in relation to the question of the ultimate grounding of existence and value as this is expressed by great thinkers in this area! Finally, in *Ethics and Society*, what could be more important than to study the great historical theories of society and ethics in relation to our own lives, to consider the issues that confront us in the contemporary world, and to reflect on the basic questions of citizenship and responsibility?

The classroom is a space set apart where extraordinary things can happen. In the space of just fifteen weeks we have tremendous and wonderful tasks to accomplish with respect to *inquiry, interpretation, integration and imagination*. The classroom is a place for real discourse, genuine philosophy, not ordinary conversation. It is a place for deeper questioning, careful critical thinking, and developing our imaginations. It is a place of great seriousness and exciting

possibilities.

Anonymous Student Evaluations and Academic Freedom

Glen T. Martin

The Radford University Handbook strongly affirms academic freedom in this powerful statement:

A vital role of the university is to examine ideologies and institutions in an intelligent and careful manner. Academic freedom is necessary to assure faculty members the right to pursue such investigation and to express their views without fear of censorship or penalty. Such freedom must apply both to teaching and research and includes not only the rights of a teacher in teaching but the rights of the student in learning.

One excellent feature of this statement is that it affirms that academic freedom is a right both of students in learning and of faculty members. If there is a fear of censorship or penalty, then the vital role of the university to examine ideologies and institutions in an intelligent and careful manner is threatened. This freedom applies to both teaching (in the classroom) and research (professional writing). When students come into the classroom, they have the right, the academic freedom, to hear the professor's best thought regarding examination of ideologies and institutions. Any administrative induced fear of censorship or penalty violates the rights of the students to get a real, solid education, not just receive canned propaganda from intimidated professors afraid to give their real views as educated, scholarly professionals.

The National and local AAUP stands fully behind the Radford University policy on academic freedom. In a recent, widely publicized case a prominent Professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, made a statement in which he characterized some of the people who died in the attacks on the World Trade Center as "little Eichmanns." A tremendous furor ensued that included hundreds of hate mail messages, many death threats, and condemnation of the professor by the Governor of Colorado.

The official statement of the National AAUP regarding the recent case at the University of Colorado reads, in part, as follows:

The American Association of University Professors, since its founding in 1915, has been committed to preserving and advancing principles of academic freedom in this nation's colleges and universities. Freedom of faculty members to express views, however unpopular or distasteful, is an essential condition of an institution of higher learning that is truly free. We deplore threats of violence heaped upon Professor Churchill, and we reject the notion that some viewpoints are so offensive or disturbing that the academic community should not allow them to be heard and debated. Also reprehensible are inflammatory statements by public officials that interfere in the decisions of the academic community.@

Is this the environment that we have at Radford University? Is freedom of thought so protected here by administrative and faculty support that we have among our faculty this kind of variety of challenging professors that will result in our graduates getting the central point of all higher education: *to learn to think for themselves and become self-motivated, life-long learners*? There is some doubt about this. How can this be, when our handbook has such an excellent statement on academic freedom? We suggest that most inducement of Afear of censorship or penalty@ does not come through overt forms of intimidation by administrators or officials as recently happened at the University of Colorado.

The mechanism by which the administration translates this into an atmosphere conducive of Afear of censorship or penalty@ is simple: student evaluations of faculty. Our student evaluations do not merely ask for information that can be treated objectively and reflects the quality and type of teaching that goes on in the classroom. They also encourage anonymous written comments. Such comments cannot be objectified and practically invite ideologically motivated students to react to any real Aexamination of their own ideologies and institutions.@

RU faculty are very aware that administrators read these anonymous comments and sometimes quote them in the written annual evaluation. By university policy, these anonymous comments may be used to evaluate Athe quality@ of a faculty member=s teaching performance. Faculty are aware that if they offer a real Aexamination of ideologies and institutions,@ they will be offending the prejudices of many students. They refrain; they tone it down; they make course-content as noncontroversial as possible. Faculty are aware that the administration monitors *the*

content of what they say in the classroom through the ruse of evaluating the *quality* of their teaching. Through this subterfuge, the administration here at Radford quietly places serious limits upon our academic freedom.

The solution to this serious problem of covert intimidation of academic freedom is to take the anonymous student comments out of the hands and prevue of those who evaluate teaching quality. It is almost impossible for these to be used objectively in any case. Out of, say, 40 sets of written comments, particular comments can be selected that make a case for almost anything the evaluator wishes to show. If only four of the 40 say the teacher is disorganized, these four could be quoted if the evaluator wishes to make a case for disorganization. If only four say the teacher is dogmatic and inflexible, these four could be quoted to make a case for dogmatism, etc.

If teachers know that the content of their classroom work will be anonymously portrayed by students who may not have understood what the teacher is trying to do or the depth and background behind what the teacher is saying, and if they know that these comments are placed, without restriction, in the hands of evaluators of the “quality” of their teaching, then most faculty cannot help but be intimidated in some measure. Student anonymous comments can and should be available to faculty for use in improving their teaching, but they should not be available to administrators who evaluate the “quality” of that teaching. To make them so available is a disaster both for academic freedom and the objectivity of the evaluation system.

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