

# Philosophy of Teaching and Education

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**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 and education was influenced by the Radford University Writing Across the Curriculum Program and several philosophers of education, such as John Dewey, Bruce Wilshire, Jacob Needleman, James L. Marsh, Nicholas Berdyaev, and Betty Reardon. It can be summarized in terms of these five fundamental "i" words suggested by Betty Reardon in her seminar as a guest of the Radford University Peace Studies Program in February 1999: *information, inquiry, interpretation, integration, and imagination*.

Reardon, who was Professor of Peace Education at Columbia University, linked these five principles to peace education. Really understanding and living in accord with this *process of inquiry and growth* leads people quite naturally to embrace a peace, nonviolence, and critical social perspective. The war system, on the other hand, like the unrestrained capitalist system, requires *disinformation, false inquiry, distorted interpretations, dis-integration, and lack of imagination*. The consequence of good teaching, she declared, is transformative, even revolutionary.

**Information.** There can be no education without knowing the facts, a process that is never final but an on-going lifelong quest. Knowing the facts is not always an easy task, and already the excitement of education involves the quest to be able to discern the grounds, rationales, and justifications for declaring certain things factual and other things not so. The process of thinking about what constitutes the facts also lends insight into what is symbolic, metaphorical, dogmatic, or ideological. Facts can be "framed" in different ways from different cognitive points of view.

It is very important to discern how this "framing" works and its relation to factual claims and groundings. Students and teachers who take this process seriously are already on the way to getting an "edu-cation." That is, etymologically something is "brought out" of the student, which can perhaps be called "moral and intellectual growth." If properly developed, this quest for the facts leads to the other four "i" words and embraces the entire process of getting a good education. The second, and pivotal moment in educational growth, therefore, requires developing the spirit of inquiry.

***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. Good questions often examine what people take for granted, what they mistakenly think is "self-evident." Good questions require a developing intellectual autonomy. The students must be convinced to find out for themselves, not to accept the opinions of others, including those of their culture, society, elders, religion, or teachers.

***Interpretation.*** An introductory education in philosophy (and perhaps any discipline) 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 Jürgen 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, other possibilities for our being-in-the-world. 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 *information, 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 should also be a place of great seriousness and exciting possibilities.