

My philosophy on Teaching and Learning

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I often express to friends and coworkers that, even after 20 years, "I still love teaching!" While this statement reflects my passion for teaching, it is misleading for at least two reasons. First, most of my enjoyment in the classroom does not come from the 50 minutes "on stage" during which I'm permitted to spew forth the most current or thrilling concepts and techniques in biological science. Rather, my teaching style is to engage my students in dialogue; which I've been told, can take some getting used to. Like science, I begin with a question... and then I watch for a response. This leads me to either revise my question or pose a new one. As the students formulate their questions, comments, and proposed answers, I am witness to the care and effort that is required to learn well. This is the most rewarding aspect of my profession: to watch learning take place. You might picture a student shouting, "*Eureka!*" as he reaches the summit of understanding, but these events provide only a small contribution to the joy that I experience while teaching. Often, it is a quiet triumph over some mundane but elusive point, heralded by a small sigh or a relaxation of the shoulders. And I never hesitate to announce that a question from a student has raised the hairs on the back of my neck! (I have even caught myself smiling as I watch my students *learn* while taking an exam.) Second, I thoroughly enjoy the effort required to assist my students in developing the skills to become life-long learners; to build a bridge between their highschool learning experiences in biology and the college-level expectations for scientific understanding and abilities, and to enable students to apply basic scientific principles and skills in other aspects of their lives. Each meeting with my students provides a forum in which I invariably learn more about the students as learners, about myself as a facilitator of learning, and about the methods designed to foster the learning environment.

I believe teaching is learning; it's as simple as that. For this reason, I regularly design course assignments and activities requiring peer teaching and team problem-solving. While the obvious goal is to produce a satisfying result on evaluations, students who collaborate in their efforts also benefit from an exploration of their own mental constructs; they confront misconceptions with much less anxiety, and learn to recognize diversity as a vital part of the learning process.

My philosophy of teaching centers on my responsibility not only to deliver information, but also to inspire. Students need and want to be involved, but it takes nearly constant encouragement. They recognize that their participation is necessary to learn well, but a student's time and energy is typically divided among several classes, work, and social activities. The realization that most learning does not take place in a classroom comes too late for many students. In their efforts to manage time effectively, students compartmentalize their lives such that they only allow themselves to be conscious of their learning while seated in the classroom. I purposefully model life-long learning that blurs the characteristic boundaries between science, art, family, and career. I regularly tell personal stories and ask questions about current events that a casual observer might assume compromise my command of the classroom. In fact, I've found these to be powerful teaching tools, especially in GUR courses, demonstrating meaningful opportunities for synthesis and application. The judicious insertion of these personal stories also exploits the inherent ability of the brain to energize the conscious mind when change occurs in the environment (novel stimuli), while at the same time filtering out redundant information. This surge of brain activity motivates students to subconsciously reassess the information they are receiving and assimilate it in different ways, often leading to a change in behavior...if the opportunity is provided.