

Williams Teaching Philosophy & Methods

Good teaching is a journey, not a place where we finally arrive. I might be better off (and better published) if I were not this way, but I compulsively tinker with my courses. I can't help it. The result is often exciting and fresh, not only for me, but for my students. I feel an obligation to spark an interest in my students and to connect often-dry academic material with their worlds in meaningful ways. The result is a sometimes-wooly but usually-engaging mix of lecture, media, humor, personal stories, popular culture, hands-on experiences, uses of new technologies, social media, and reflection. I tend to teach large classes, so it is critical to find ways to get students to actively seek out knowledge.

Good teachers can change the world in subtle yet powerful ways. I love to hear what other teachers are doing to help their students learn, and I have to admit to being an unapologetic thief of a good idea. At the same time, as I continue to learn and to experiment, I share ideas with anyone who will listen. When I teach the graduate student teaching seminar, I have the honor and humbling responsibility of providing guidance to novice college teachers. Working with these students has taught me that not all good teaching happens in exactly the same way. However, there are several things I consider critical to good teaching, and these are the qualities I try to develop in myself and in other teachers.

Have passion. If I had to choose only one thing to get right in the classroom, it would be to always feel passion for whatever I teach. When I am passionate about a topic, that feeling is often transferred to students. Occasionally my students and I share very strong emotional experiences in class, and those are always very good days. Our time here on Earth is fleeting, and I don't want to waste any of mine. Teaching my students not only lends meaning to my life, but it provides me with an opportunity to improve the world. If I cannot feel passion about a topic then I cannot justify including it in class, and I can only light a fire in my students if there is a fire burning in me.

Use a variety of techniques. People learn in a variety of ways, and it is best to use a wide number of approaches to hit as many of the students in a class as possible. Thus, while I use lectures, I also rely on things such as interactive in-class work, experiential activities, new technology, media, case studies, and discussion to help students connect in meaningful ways with key concepts. Recently, I have started using a polling website live in class where students use their phones to anonymously text their responses to questions I set up beforehand. The results are displayed as graphs that change as their texts are received. Not only are we having a ball with it, but it creates interest among the students, it creates a layer of engagement in a large class of 70 students, and it provides me insight into where they are as a group. When I'm lucky enough to have a small class, I try to facilitate meaningful learning experiences outside of the classroom. For instance, the students in a recent summer recreational therapy course helped facilitate an adaptive waterski clinic for people with physical disabilities. It was an incredible experience for all of us.

Create an open and social classroom environment. I spend the first class period of every course helping the students get to know one another and me, and I reinforce an open and social environment all semester. I want students to interact with each other. I want them to talk and joke in class, and I want to laugh with them. An open and social environment fosters discussions both in class and outside of class, and that is where the bulk of learning takes place. Such an environment requires trust, and the only way I know to establish trust is through honesty that is sometimes a little raw. Of course, I don't share everything, but what I share is always the truth.

Make it fun, and if you can't make it fun, at least make it funny. Learning should be fun. Teaching should be fun. When it stops being fun, something has gone wrong. Probably the most common statement that appears on my student evaluations every semester is that I am funny. I do not tell jokes in class, but I do tell stories. Half the time I am surprised when

they laugh, but in the end I think humor and humorous stories are a good vessel for knowledge. A little self-deprecating humor goes a long way.

Be organized, and be fair. My students tend to obsess on trees rather than forests, and I try to keep that in mind when it comes to course management. An important and big message (that I want them to care about) can be lost if the details (which is what they seem to care most about) are not attended to. It is worth the time to be sure that notes are posted before class, the syllabus is explicit, test questions are fair, and lectures stay on-point.

Additionally, all of the good work done by a teacher can instantly be undone if students feel they have been treated unfairly. An expressed commitment to fairness invites partners in education rather than creating a combative, non-scholarly environment.

Good teaching is a debt owed to students and to the academy. As a teacher, I am in a position of honor and privilege that I will not squander. I feel incredibly lucky to have the best job in the world.