

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

“Dr. Buzinski thoroughly knew the material, and we could tell he had a passion for the subject. He is VERY motivated in teaching; he cares that we learn the material and was very careful to cover every aspect of teaching (engagement, responsibility, priorities, timeliness, communication, etc.) in order to make sure he was an effective instructor. He also incorporated a versatile array of approaches (powerpoints, readings, surveys, activities, projects) that helped reinforce the material. I was very impressed by his drive.”

My teaching philosophy is evolving. If I held too rigidly onto a set of principles then I would risk failing to adjust as evidence informs pedagogical best practices. Maintaining effectiveness for my students requires me to be open to consistently updating, and occasionally radically changing, my philosophies of teaching. Thus, an undercurrent of my teaching philosophy is to remain informed and to be flexible.

Informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g., Blumberg, 2008), disciplinary research in Psychology and the Learning Sciences (e.g., Roediger & Karpicke, 2006; Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999), and refined by years of working with teaching and learning initiatives at the University of Maryland, Lebanon Valley College, and the University of North Carolina, my philosophy currently has three cornerstones: the centrality of the learner, the importance of structured design, and the use of critical feedback.

Learner-Centered

You're an awesome instructor. You seem very motivated and knowledgeable. Your approach and method for teaching always kept my attention. Because of you after this semester I actually feel like a Psych Major. Keep it up. You are making a wonderful impact -- HONESTLY!

A learner-centered course places the focus on the process, and the learning, of students rather than on the performance of the professor. A preponderance of evidence has demonstrated this necessary shift away from the “sage on the stage” model of instruction. Instructors are more appropriately thoughtful engineers of the environment in which students can best learn. We are there to mentor and guide, build inclusive spaces, and help students develop an understanding of both disciplinary content and the science of learning itself. The learner-centered philosophy informs the expectations that I establish with students, my classroom structure, and an emphasis on student engagement.

Instructor expectations play an important role in developing an effective learning environment (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Research by Jacobson and colleagues (1992) demonstrates that higher teacher expectations lead to better student learning. In order to establish high, and clear, expectations, I spend part of the first day of class discussing my confidence in the academic efficacy of students. That, with the proper strategies (that we then discuss), students are capable of attaining and sustaining the effort, participation, and engagement necessary to learn the material and perform to their desired standards in my courses. Building this sense of self-efficacy in light of clear expectations also serves to increase learner motivation, according to the expectancy-value theory of motivation.

The learner-centered approach's greatest departure from traditional modes of teaching is the structure of class meetings. Rather than spending the majority of meetings lecturing, hoping to “spill knowledge into students' minds” (Richlin, 2011), I engage in direct instruction, focusing on explanation and narrative, for 5 to 10-minute intervals, and then transition into periods of critical discussion and reflection. Subsequent student discussions are scaffolded with techniques like think-pair-share, one-minute papers, see one, do one, teach one, group-regroup, debate, and even games. These pedagogies structure engagement but also reinforce the expectation that students have to be active architects of their own learning.

Students are responsible for their learning, but a teacher-scholar is responsible for creating the environment in which that learning can best occur. As a consequence, I do not think that teaching only to the intrinsically motivated student is enough. As an instructor one of my responsibilities is to increase engagement with, and motivation for, the material; factors that determine the intensity and duration of students' information processing (Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999). Fortunately well-deployed active learning and course development techniques can do this. Several of the techniques that I use are: telling stories about my life experiences as they relate to the topic at hand, prompting discussions of how the material can impact students' lives, using popular culture multimedia (e.g., TED talks, Twitter) as a lens through which we discuss basic science, using classroom response systems to poll the class for their perspectives in real-time, giving students choice and autonomy where appropriate on assignments and in discussion, and by encouraging relationship development among students, which helps to foster a culture of belonging, safety, and positive regard.

“Also, it means a lot that Dr. B made a point to know all of our names. I felt like people (including those I worked with on our group project) actually cared and knew me. It's hard to feel that in a big school, and it also makes the experience so much more pleasant. I'm more committed to working harder because I'm motivated to support my team and a professor who actually knows me.”

Structured Design

“I understood the purpose of all the assignments, and their validity, but it was time consuming to do all of the assigned worksheets and a huge semester long group project. However, I would add that Dr. Buzinski is a great professor. Engaging and funny, his class was always a pleasure to attend. He could teach others how to liven up lecture.”

I believe in the importance of carefully structured course design. This philosophical cornerstone informs my course-design model, which includes backwards-design, consistent assessment, and high-impact pedagogy.

Backwards-design forces me to consider the broadest, and most important, learning outcomes before I start creating the details of a course. I use my learning outcomes to guide the decisions that I make regarding which information to include, the over-arching connections that I want my students to make, and the way in which I will assess student knowledge. I consistently reinforce the learning outcomes by providing two types of course documents containing them. The first are reading forms, on which students can take notes relevant to each learning outcome while reading. The second are discussion forms, on which students can take notes during class. Learning outcomes also structure each class discussion, as they are time-chunked by outcome.

I assess student understanding often and in varying ways. I strongly believe that assessment is not merely a means of quantifying learning; it is a powerful creator and solidifier of knowledge (Roediger, 2014; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). For this reason I assess informally, such as when students complete “brain dumps” after a discussion (a retrieval-practice technique; Agarwal, 2018), and formally, such as when students complete learning assessments (in-class Poll Everywhere based quizzes). Assessments vary from low-stakes (learning assessments worth .25% of the course total) to high-stakes (examinations worth 20%), and occur before, during, and after discussions. In addition to the “testing effect” benefit, my assessment model allows a consistent flow of feedback regarding how the student is progressing throughout the semester.

I also believe that teaching should be impactful, and learning long-lasting. High impact pedagogies are a class of teaching and learning techniques that aim to connect abstract course material with the lives and

goals of students, and the community around them. There are a number of demonstrated positive outcomes associated with using high impact pedagogy. Two of them are particularly important to my overall teaching philosophy. First, information encoding, retrieval, and application is enhanced due to the increased practice with, and manipulation of, course material (Reed, 1988), and second, high impact pedagogy increases students' perception of the importance of their work. High impact pedagogies like service learning, scholarship-in-practice, and civic engagement projects allow students to develop their professionally-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as to potentially make a meaningful impact on their science and/or community. This is in contrast to the "academic exercise" model, wherein students only demonstrate mastery within the confines of well-worn exercises or writing theoretically-relevant but untested proposal papers. Because of the benefits associated with high impact pedagogy, I include some form of it in every one of my courses.

I wanted to express my compliments to Team North Star on their "Be a P.A.L." project. They have been detail oriented and enthusiastic to work with throughout. The team followed a detailed timeline and provided me with constant communication on their progress. They have done an excellent job with the video, which now has a home on our website. I have been impressed.
-Brienne Rowh (Director of Fitness Services)

Feedback & Revision

Finally, I believe that the effectiveness of a teacher-scholar is forged in the fire of critical feedback and subsequent revision. Using student feedback, collected through classroom assessment techniques, to iterate a course within the semester provides students with a sense of power over course outcomes, and enhances the sense of connectedness between students and professor (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Whereas end-of-semester evaluations do provide helpful information for future classes, I like to employ CATs at several points within a semester. They help me to make real time changes to better accommodate the learning, pace, and norms of each new collection of students (Angelo & Cross, 1993).

Visiting Steve's class, it was very clear that he had a good classroom relationship with his students - he was able to create lively discussion with students both asking and answering questions and he had a good feel for how well his students were understanding new ideas. He also used a number of different teaching methods within a single class period, helping him connect with the variety of students in the class and keep everybody engaged.
-Dr. Samuel Kollins

I also believe that it is important to use peer review in order to identify pedagogical weaknesses in my courses. My peers have deep expertise on a range of pedagogical and disciplinary topics, and tapping their feedback helps me to refine my general teaching techniques as well as to develop topical breadth. Moreover, colleagues are likely to have encountered the classroom dilemmas with which I might struggle, and often help prevent or alleviate such problems. To this end, I make it a point to formally and informally engage the community of instructors at my university and beyond, and I believe that their feedback has been invaluable in shaping the current form of my teaching philosophy. I do not believe that my philosophy will ever be "set," but this is how it currently stands: focus on the learner, consider structure, assess often & provide feedback, make an impact, and seek out feedback in order to improve. Thank you for reading.