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Teaching Philosophy

In my many years as a student I have often heard my peers grumble and my professors lament over what may be one of the most common phrases in academia: “When will I use this in real life?”. Indeed, I have at times caught myself questioning the usefulness of memorizing lists of information that I know is readily available in textbooks and online resources. In truth, many of these activities were important in creating a fundamental understanding of the subject, such as memorizing where on the periodic table one may find the atomic weight of an element, however some did feel superfluous, such as memorizing the atomic weights of even uncommonly used elements. So how, then, does an instructor decide the most effective way to teach this material? My strategy as an instructor has been to focus on teaching students *where* to access information and *how* to use that information appropriately in solving problems. This approach underlies each of my classes.

On developing a new course, I use a backwards course design. That is, I determine the goals and outcomes I wish for my students to achieve before developing lectures, activities or exams. This allows all learning strategies to be tailored directly to what is most important for my students to know or learn to do. For example, in teaching a psychology course on psychosocial adjustment, I felt that it would be important for students to understand not only the definitions presented in the textbook but how those definitions relate to their own experiences. As such, rather than giving them assignments to outline chapters or memorize definitions, I had students regularly complete journals relating the material to situations they have experienced. At the end of the semester students told me that they were finding the principles from the course all around them in a way they had never noticed before.

Another key component to my teaching style is that classroom time should be used effectively for active learning. Students complete a reading quiz before class starts, so rather than spending class time regurgitating definitions for those who did not read, we all come in with a basic understanding of the material. From there, students can do activities and have discussions about how that topic impacts our world and how it relates to other principles already covered in the class. Additionally, we have ample class time to work through more complex topics and make sure all concepts are clear, rather than spending that time introducing new concepts. Admittedly, when I first implemented the weekly reading quizzes I expected discontentment and resistance from students, however many students spoke positively about the experience, stating that the quizzes allowed them to stay on top of the material and get more out of the time in class.

Lastly, and most importantly, I use application-based assessments in my courses. In practice this usually means open-book, open-note exams. Students are not asked to repeat things from the book but rather to be able to make connections across chapters and apply that knowledge to vignettes. This idea comes from the understanding that in the current era we carry small computers in our pockets, capable of providing any information we need in a heartbeat. The more important skill, however, is to know *what* information we need to find and *how to use* that information once we find it. By allowing students to have access to the same resources they would have “in the real world”, they are not only learning the material but also practicing the life-skills they will need to succeed in a career that uses that information.

Combining these elements as I have described leads to a classroom where people can discuss and participate in the material, rather than repeat it from a book or lecture. Students are inquisitive in nature and, in my experience, greatly enjoy the opportunity to apply information

they have learned in a challenging and creative ways (e.g., a student once told me after taking my exam that he *enjoyed* the exam *appreciated* how it was written). Because all elements of the course are leading to predesigned goals, I can avoid busywork or wasted time and make best use of those precious 15 weeks we have together to build the skills necessary for a student to succeed outside of the classroom and in their future career. Going forward, I plan to work on my continued growth as an educator. By taking advantage of opportunities to progress, including staying active in communities such as the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, I will continue my path as a lifelong learner and hope to inspire students to realize the knowledge and skills within themselves.