Teaching and Learning Philosophy

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I want my students to learn. While this idea seems trivial, I believe it does not get the emphasis it merits. So much prominence is placed on taking tests, writing papers, completing assignments, and other graded activities that the main reason for being in a class is often overshadowed. As a teacher, my aim is to make it clear to the student that their primary purpose is to learn the subject being taught and my purpose is to guide them in that process and also learn things that will help me become a more effective teacher.

Too often as a student, my goal in a class was to get a good grade on the current assignment or test and then move on to the next task. In courses where exams and concepts weren't cumulative over the semester, I would always look at my score on an assignment or test, but rarely would go back to see what my mistakes were, as I viewed them as failures and not opportunities for learning. As a teacher, I want to create a learning environment where my students are not afraid of or intimidated by their mistakes, but rather view them as necessary steps toward deeper understanding.

Furthermore, I plan to structure the courses I teach so exams are cumulative over the term, as well as periodically using quizzes that have little or no impact on a student's grade. This way, I can determine what my students actually know, and not what they have temporarily placed in their heads while cramming the night before. These quizzes can also provide me with information on how well I am teaching, and give me a starting point for making changes that will enhance my students' learning.

Also my intention is to incorporate relevant historical examples into my teaching as a means of fitting the topics of the course into a larger context. For instance, when introducing a new theorem, I would discuss who devised it, why it was created, and why it's important to learn about that particular theorem. In addition to framing the topic within a larger context, these examples can also demonstrate higher levels of learning that my students might be encouraged to move toward.

In addition to using feedback from student evaluations to improve my teaching, I also plan on learning from my peers in teaching through journals such as ACM SIGCSE and other professional development opportunities. Also, I have recently completed a course at UW-Madison on teaching in the college classroom, through which I have understood how to become a better learner, as well as a better teacher.

In my experience as a teaching assistant, it has sometimes been difficult to avoid falling into the trap of being too helpful toward students who desire assistance. While it is often easier to just give them the solution, it is more beneficial and rewarding for both me and the student when I guide them toward the correct answer in simple steps that they figure out on their own. This instills in them the ability to analyze the problem at hand and work out both the solution and the process of reaching it on their own, which they can apply to more complex situations in the future. This deep level of learning is what I wish for all my students to attain.

Overall, I hope to foster a stimulating classroom environment where learning is encouraged and mistakes can be made and viewed as opportunities for improvement. These attributes of the classroom should apply to both me and my students with the ultimate goal of a deep level of learning for everyone involved.