

# Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Methodology

Stephen McNamee

My philosophy of teaching is embodied in a set of principles based on a combination of my experience as a student and as a teacher. These principles are neither exhaustive nor entirely mutually exclusive but represent in summary fashion what I consider to be the key ingredients of effective teaching and effective learning. Although I see teaching and learning as a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing process, to avoid redundancy, I will express them here simply as principles of "good teaching."

1. ***Good teachers are good story tellers.*** Story telling is almost a lost art form in modern industrial societies. Prior to written and electronically enhanced forms of communication, the primary way to transmit the knowledge of the group was through story telling. Good story telling requires good stories and good story tellers. Every academic discipline has a story to tell--about how the physical world works, about how the social world works, about the nature of the human condition. Good teaching begins with a good story which is acquired--as it was for our pre-literate ancestors --through the passing on of a tradition. In our case, the tradition represents a cumulative body of knowledge and an intellectual legacy of scholarship. Good story tellers know the stories and know how to communicate them. For me, telling the story of sociology is similar to sharing a juicy bit of gossip with a friend or relating a sad, funny, or poignant experience. I am fond of telling my students that the "stuff" of sociology is the "stuff" of everyday life that people talk about in everyday conversations--how individuals and groups relate with and toward one another, how individuals fit into the grand scheme of things, how society is organized as a whole. I consider myself very fortunate to be able to make a career out of what most people find interesting and talk about in everyday conversation. Whatever one's discipline might be, I think passion and enthusiasm for the subject matter is absolutely essential to good teaching.
2. ***Good teachers are good listeners and good learners.*** As previously stated, I think teaching and learning are dialectically related. Good teachers are good at what we refer to in sociology as "taking the role of the other toward the self. " Good teachers don't just act but act and react. Good teachers modify and adjust to what students are thinking, saying, and doing. Good teachers place themselves imaginatively in the role of student and constantly ask themselves how they would react under similar circumstances. Good teachers "read" student reactions and are sensitive to social cues. Good teachers actively solicit student input. Lately, I have been periodically handing out index cards to students as "questions and comment" cards in which I direct students to write down one question or comment about "anything we have been talking about or about any of the reading assignments or about how the course is going for you, or whatever else might be on your mind." I collect the cards at the end of the period and then talk about themes or respond to particular comments or questions at the beginning of the next class. Previously, I used informal "mid course" evaluations along the same lines, but I have found the index card technique to be an especially useful listening tool. I wish I could take credit for coming up with the index card idea but I did not. I shamelessly adopted it (with permission) from Dr. William Johnston, who was formerly in the Watson School of Education and with whom I team taught an Honors Seminar. Even old teachers can learn new tricks.
3. ***Good teachers don't give students everything they want.*** Not everything that students want is necessarily in their best interest. For instance, in a review session for one of my tests, I initially fielded questions about the material we had covered and then offered to provide any additional elaboration or clarification on any other points students wished to raise. With time permitting, I then suggested that the best thing I could do for them by way of review was to tell them how I would go about preparing for the test. I then proceeded to emphasize the importance of organized and systematic preparation and I told them how I would go about doing that. After the test, several of the students in the class (through their comments and questions cards) indicated to me that what they really wanted to know in the review session was what specifically was going to be on the test. In response to the request, I seized the opportunity to have a "teaching moment." I told the students I would not

tell them specifically what was going to be on the test but they deserved to know why I would not. I told them that in my opinion "teaching the test" was bad teaching. I then explained that tests are samples, hopefully representative and unbiased, of a universe of knowledge which I expected them to comprehend. Given human nature, if they knew specifically what was going to be on the test, then I would assume they would act rationally and only study the material sampled rather than the material itself. Although this would require less effort, less learning would take place and I would be abdicating my responsibilities as a teacher. I extend this philosophy not to just testing but to course content as well. I disagree with a teaching philosophy that essentially says that if students don't like it, then don't assign it. Like the name of a particular brand of yogurt, everything else being equal, some students might prefer a steady diet of "lite and lively." But not everything worth knowing is superficially amusing or easy to comprehend. Americans "like" high fat, high sugar, high salt food, but a steady diet of the same is not healthy. I believe the same principle applies to higher education. A corollary to this principle is that "good teachers challenge students" both intellectually and in terms of their own lived experience, which brings me to my next point.

4. ***Good teachers don't tell students everything they want to hear.*** It has become fashionable in some circles in higher education to equate good teaching/learning with being able to relate course content to the students' personal experience. The general spirit of this philosophy is sound and, where applicable, works very well. However, I think that it can be overextended to the detriment of students and to the learning process. Allow me to illustrate my point in reference to my own discipline of sociology. That a person has a human body, for instance, does not make that person an expert in anatomy, physiology, or biochemistry. Similarly, that someone occupies some social space in the context of a particular society, does not make that person an expert in social behavior or society. Sociologists contend that our individual experience of society is necessarily out of context (unrepresentative of society as a whole) and out of focus (filtered through various prisms and frames of reference--rich vs. poor, white vs. nonwhite; female vs. male, etc.--- through which we interpret personal experience). Indeed, the job of the sociologist is to systematically contextualize and bring into focus individual experiences *in relation to* the experiences of others. A corollary to this principle is that it is axiomatic in sociology that you do not have to be one to know one (e.g. a criminologist does not have to be criminal to be an expert on crime). A teaching philosophy that would suggest that *only* by relating everything to one's personal experience can learning be relevant or meaningful is essentially asociological. College students typically have very limited experience of the world and most of our students come from relatively homogeneous backgrounds. If education is *only* a reinforcement, a validation, a reaffirmation of limited personal experience, then no value-added learning curve takes place. People like to be awash with familiarity; it is soothing and comforting. But as Kant once experienced for himself, in some ways we all need to be awakened from our "dogmatic slumber." This *necessarily* requires us to "see" beyond our own immediate life world. It seems to me that the noble ideal of the academy and life of the mind is to *expand* one's personal horizons, not be bound by them. This journey of discovery is frequently unsettling. It requires us to rethink our basic assumptions about what we previously took for granted. I think this is especially relevant in the social sciences. Students are fairly neutral in terms of, for instance, the molecular structure of a particular chemical compound. But students are anything but neutral about how they think society is arranged. I do not believe that I am doing my job unless in every class I challenge each student's view of the social world as they thought they knew it.
5. ***Good teachers engage students in the learning process.*** Techniques that place students in an active rather than passive mode enhance the learning process. Good teachers engage students through such active learning strategies as in-class exercises, hands-on projects, written assignments, research assignments, and active discussion. In short, learning is enhanced by the "doing" of something rather than just by reading or hearing about something.
6. ***Good teachers know that they do not know everything.*** Good teachers realize that "I don't know but how do you think we could we find out" is a perfectly good answer to a student question. Good teachers are not those who presume to have all the answers but those who encourage students to ask the best questions.

7. ***Good teachers teach with the long view in mind.*** There is a comedian who does a priest character he calls "Fr. Guido Sarducci." I once observed "Fr. Sarducci" doing an hilarious skit about the opening of his "five minute university." In this skit, Fr. Sarducci explains that after ten years, what college graduates can remember about what they learned in college could be stated in about five minutes. So in his "Five Minute University," he skips everything else and teaches students the critical five minutes worth of knowledge that college graduates are likely to remember later anyway. Obviously, this was done tongue-in-cheek, but it was funny precisely because there is a grain of truth in it. Looking back on my own college career, I can recall very little detail about the content of courses I took outside of sociology. I remember the sociology content only because it was reinforced and extended in graduate school and because I continue to "do" sociology for a living. The lesson from this, I think, is that process is more important in the long run than content. Good teachers know this. It is more important, for instance, for students to learn how to distill, organize, synthesize, analyze, and interpret information than it is for them to "know" any particular piece of information. Content is still important, especially as foundation for further study in a specialized field. But beyond the few students who pursue graduate study among the many who pass through our classrooms, the content of a field of study is not likely to be as essential in the long run as the process. I teach a course, for instance, called "Organizations in Modern Society." Except for students who are graduate school bound in sociology, the "sociology" of organizations is not as critical as the life lessons that can be gleaned from a general understanding and appreciation of *how* organizations work. I am fond of telling my students that if they want to "work the system," then they should know "how the system works." Teaching works best when students can take with them what they learned beyond the next test, beyond the grade, beyond the degree, and beyond the walls of the university.
8. ***Good teachers take risks.*** Good teachers are willing to experiment with new and different teaching methods. I use combinations of lecture, discussion, projects, collaborative learning, service learning, films, speakers, multimedia and web presentations--in short, any method at my disposal that I think might arouse intellectual curiosity or illustrate an idea. Thus, with respect to teaching methods, I am entirely eclectic and pragmatic. I like to "mix it up" for variety but the particular combination that works best depends a great deal on a number of factors including course content, class size, course level, but most importantly, trial and error. As with our students, experience can be a harsh teacher, but often the best. When I no longer get butterflies on the first day of class and I am no longer willing to risk looking silly in front of a class, then I will know it is time to hang up the spikes.