

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Good teachers understand that learning is largely an internal and independent activity, one that's different for each student. Regardless of the efforts educators make to convey knowledge, the absorption and utilization of that knowledge is still a process that students must undertake themselves. All teachers try to facilitate this process, but the reality is that they have relatively little time to spend with their students. Even when they extend themselves to provide additional demonstrations, workshops, and office hours, the vast majority of the time students are left to their own devices. Without the ability and motivation to function independently, the learning process stops once students leave the classroom.

Over the years, I've come to understand that the most important functions I have as an educator are 1) teaching students to learn and function independently and 2) encouraging and motivating them by developing an open, creative, and engaging learning environment.

While there is obviously much more to being a good teacher than these two directives, I firmly believe almost every other function of learning (problem solving, critical thinking, etc.) evolves from a student's drive and ability to learn independently. As such, it's my responsibility to create an educational environment that maximizes the potential for such growth within each student.

I employ several techniques to encourage independent learning, one of which is to make educational resources as diverse and available as possible. Prior to beginning of each term I create extensive collections of potential resources that include texts, articles, videos, Web resources, and any other assets that may assist students with their endeavors. While this is a fairly common practice among instructors, I strive to integrate these resources into my curricula as much as possible. By doing so, I believe I help make these resources more familiar to my students and therefore encourage their use outside the classroom. Every effort is made to update these resources as frequently as possible, and students are given incentives to make their own contributions when they identify new resources. By effectively outsourcing these updates to the class I enhance my own learning while empowering students to take an active role in their own education.

Another technique I employ is offering incentives and opportunities for students to present new and emerging topics in their particular areas of interest. This may include something as simple as an interesting article to short seminars highlighting a new technology, process, or emerging artist. Over the years I've found that students respond very well to these opportunities, often bringing new and exciting things to my attention that I may not have had the time to explore on my own.

An additional strategy I use to empower students is to give them a degree of freedom in designing their own projects and assignments. While certain specifications and learning outcomes are always necessary to maintain the integrity of a particular course, allowing students to pursue their own interests almost always seems to achieve better results. While much easier to grade and provide assistance for, projects with strict objectives and universal design parameters can often stifle the creativity and enthusiasm of the individual student.

In a sense, I feel encouraging independent learning and motivation is largely about putting the curriculum in the hands of the students themselves. While doing so requires additional effort and certainly comes with no guarantee of success, I find the potential for motivation and engagement far outweighs the negative consequences of such an approach. When given the freedom to guide their own education, I've found that students generally tend to embrace such opportunities. This benefits students in achieving their educational goals while simultaneously creating a rewarding and richly stimulating environment for myself as an educator.