

Philosophy of Teaching

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Learning happens when engaged students, substantive content, and an energized professor interact in such a way that the students make new knowledge their own and seek to apply it in their lives and in the larger society. I see this happening when a student raises a tough question, when I hear a report of a late night conversation in the dorm, when a student is upset on our arrival in Manger Square because we Americans rolled right through the security barrier at the wall while Palestinians had to stand in long lines. When knowledge meets affect and moves toward action--that is the learning I seek to foster.

My role as a professor is to facilitate such learning. At times, that involves communication of new knowledge, which I seek to convey with rich media and in view of the varied learning styles of students. At times, my role is to set the stage for discovery so that students individually or in community might explore, analyze, and interpret new data. Whether it is an issue-based discussion session in an Honors class or the opening of a new locus in a square at an archaeological excavation, I believe these moments lead to the most significant learning, as previous theory and knowledge are tested and amended. And at times, my role is to probe, push, evaluate, or correct. Learning requires a feedback loop, the shorter the better, so that future growth is possible. I have high expectations for my students which I communicate explicitly and to which I hold students consistently.

My goals for my students vary by course. For me, the learning outcomes for the program shape the learning outcomes for the course which in turn form the particular goals for each session or activity. In Biblical Greek students must master the grammar and syntax sufficiently so that they may begin to translate Biblical texts with standard helps. Doing so requires practice and a focus on problem areas. "Flipping" the course enables us to spend our best time on these latter activities. In classes on the Bible, I help students to read texts in their cultural and literary contexts as part of the preparation for application. But in such classes, I have a more important goal – to be a faithful and winsome witness to the Good News in Jesus. In archaeology and Honors classes, I open students up to the opportunity and challenge of interdisciplinary studies. I take these varied approaches because I believe that higher education must be effectual. Higher education must accomplish the goals set out for it by society, and in Concordia's case, the church.

At the core of my teaching are two basic principles:

1. the enlightened life makes possible service to others and care for creation and
2. the Gospel of Jesus Christ empowers such service and care.

Day-to-day these principles mean I enter the classroom convinced that what we are about to do together matters not only for the future of the students in the room but also for all of us on the planet. I regularly begin class sessions with prayer to mark our time together as one in which the spirit of Jesus is present. My beginning pattern is consistent: matters of class administration are clarified, learning of the unit and especially the previous session is reviewed, and I lay out the objective for the session. Then we engage in the work of the day together. At the end of the session, we review and in particular raise up the durative importance of what we have just done together.

It is my sincere desire that my classroom be inclusive, even as the Gospel reaches out to all. This work is particularly important because non-Lutheran and non-Christian students often worry about taking a class in Theology. I work to make students feel welcome. I try to know their names by the second class session and I seek to know them more personally over the semester. I am intentional about using examples from varied cultures and enabling minority voices to be heard. I jokingly but insistently require my Greek students to translate the third person singular as "she/he/or it..." In my class on Jesus and Muhammad, I recruit classroom "experts" from my Muslim students and often turn to them to help me improve my pronunciation

of Arabic names and terms. And on occasion, as I look about a particularly diverse classroom, I remember standing in a large crowd of peoples from many nations at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and thinking that this moment might be a glimpse of heaven.

Assessment is a critical part of aligning course goals and teaching methods. I employ informal formative assessment in the daily periods of review and at test time. I also periodically ask for direct feedback from students as to what is working and what isn't, what is clear and what requires more unpacking. Concordia Saint Paul has a robust system of summative assessment through which I have access to cumulative data spanning a number of years. As a result, my courses are rarely static from one semester to the next. I use data to help improve what I do in the classroom.

Lastly, in my teaching I am confident in the power of the Holy Spirit working through the proclaimed Word. The divine word accomplishes its purpose (Isaiah 55:11). That promise sustains me in my work as a teacher.