

Bobby Pelz

Philosophy Statement

I seek to empower my students to participate within their communities as critical citizens that question and challenge the existing social status quo; to work for progressive social change. I think it is always far more exciting and enabling for students to gain competence in the knowledge and skills they study in school if they learn that they can actually put these to productive use. I believe that the knowledge and skills students gain from school extends beyond the struggle to survive, the quest for personal satisfaction and individual prosperity. They should serve as more than merely means to the acquisition of an individual and personal end. Students hear and read and talk about major social and political problems often, yet they also frequently think of these problems as beyond their capability to influence. I aim to show my students that they do not need to accept this sense of their own insignificance and powerlessness. I believe that they can begin to make a difference in the positions they take up and in the practices they pursue within the immediate local communities and the larger, macro-communities in which they participate. Ultimately, I seek to show my students that they can work together, steadily linking up the efforts of more and more individuals and groups, to make substantial contributions towards advancing the causes of human emancipation, social justice, collective equality, and ecological sustainability. In my experience, this kind of teaching, teaching which respects all that students can be, makes the most exciting contribution both to the students and to the communities of which they are a part and in which they participate throughout their everyday lives.

I encourage my students to inquire into what social conditions make possible and what social forces give rise to their "own" most precious ways of thinking, understanding, feeling, believing, communicating, interacting, acting, and behaving. I also ask them to find what social ends are advanced and what social interests are served by means of their identifying with, accepting of, and conforming to the dictates of these kinds of social positions. I seek to teach my students to recognize that their "opinions" are not simply opinions, purely individual and without consequence; instead, I want my students to see that these "opinions" also represent social positions and therefore work to advance social ends and to serve social interests. I try to show my students that these positions, these ends, and these interests always challenge and are challenged by other opposing positions, ends, and interests. I want my students to be able and ready to communicate these positions in the hope that they come to a common understanding, rather than creating content simply to indicate that this is how they think or feel.

It is especially important for a teacher to work hard to encourage their students to recognize that they really can engage with the subject matter of the class in a fashion which is both serious and productive. A teacher must work closely with all of his students to show them how they all can become good students in the subject area. It is necessary therefore that a teacher be patient and flexible. They must be able to pay careful attention to how their students are and/or are not relating to and understanding the subject matter so as to be able to respond appropriately and to make changes whenever and wherever needed. This includes making the

necessary accommodations for students with special needs; exceptional students, students with disabilities or English language learners. Students will not be able to become critical citizens if they do not understand the subject matter and cannot express themselves appropriately. While the subject matter can be the motivation for learning, it is the learning that is central to the classroom. The teacher must prioritize learning and understanding for the sake of learning and understanding above all else.

I believe that how I teach must always be justified in terms of what it does for my students; but the real success of any class I teach depends as much, if not much more, on what the students bring and give to the process of learning. I see teaching and learning as a collective project and this means its success or failure depends upon the degree and kind of commitment and contribution of everyone involved. Some of the best teachers with whom I have ever worked insist that they do not teach their students as much as they teach their students how to teach each other. This means that I expect students in my classes to work very hard and very seriously even as I expect that this work can be fun and enjoyable and even as I believe that humor occupies an important and necessary place in learning. I expect my students to make a serious effort to read and to write and to present and to comment and to discuss and to argue and to critique in all of the ways that are required to be successful at life. I will always work equally hard to help students who make this kind of effort succeed, both within my classes and beyond.