Teaching Reflection

Congratulations on earning your Certificate in Undergraduate Teaching Skills. I am thrilled with the prospect of sharing my thoughts on teaching with individuals who already made a commitment to the quality of their teaching skills.

Being asked to share my reflections on teaching is a joy for me. I love thinking about how we can best reach our students so that they can grow not only in content knowledge but as humans with a sense of purpose and meaning. I am always amazed by the capacity of the human brain and the many ways in which we learn. And, I am equally amazed by the inner spirit and drive we have as humans to learn and be engaged with others. We are blessed as teachers to share in the lives of our students. We are so lucky to help them to see their potential during challenging times in the classroom and in their personal lives.

I am a first generation college graduate. My parents grew up in the Great Depression and always impressed on us the value of education – formal education as well as reading books and learning from others with more life experience. My father graduated from 8th grade before starting work on the loading docks. My mother left school after 6th grade to work in a shoe factory in order to support her siblings and mother. They were both avid readers. I recall my mother having long philosophical discussions with my uncles around the kitchen table. Maybe that is why I enjoy teaching a course in professional ethics so much. My dad was a first generation American and the oldest child. As such he was the interpreter for the older family members and spoke four languages. My parents’ belief that hard work and a good education were paramount greatly influenced my desire to go to college. They never promised college – only high school but I was fortunate to have teachers who helped me to believe in my potential and encouraged me to go to college. I was the first in our family to attend college straight from high school. Like many of you and many of our students I worked multiple part-time jobs while taking 18 credits each semester. I believe all these experiences shaped my future interaction with students and I am grateful for them. I owe much to the teachers in my life and I hope to give that same support as a teacher and mentor.

Being a faculty mentor is one of the greatest gifts we are given and one that I find most rewarding and challenging. As I mentioned earlier, I have been blessed with many caring teachers over the years whose love and compassion influenced my interaction with students. I imagine many of you are here because of your personal experiences with similar teachers in your lives. Hold that image before you for direction during challenging situations. Just as our students need nurturing, we need to nurture our spirits through reading and meaningful conversation about teaching and learning. I encourage you to read the works of Parker Palmer if you have not to this point. Find kindred spirits; use teaching centers such as Reinert Center to help you continue to grow as a teacher. Keep your teaching fresh: if you love what you are doing, it is likely the students will be more engaged. I attend every teaching update that I can fit into my schedule. They refresh my spirit, give me the opportunity to see old friends and make new ones and learn tricks to enhance student learning. As a seasoned teacher I am always cognizant of age difference so I want to understand the characteristics of the current cohort in order to see the positive and not fall into negative observations. As a younger teacher I was more rigid than I am now. I still hold my students to high standards but I am more compassionate as I listen to student accounts of a situation which I may have interpreted differently had I not. I continue to work on being more mindful when I am in the classroom and when I interact with students. It can be a real challenge on some days.

Remember what it was like to be a student. They are learning about themselves as independent beings. They are learning to balance class requirements, work responsibility, freedom and social commitments on their own. It can be daunting for many. Some years ago I began reading Parker Palmer’s books on teaching. I followed his advice and starting taking courses in areas I had little or no skills so that I could once again experience being a novice. I am so inept with my attempts at knitting or conversational French but I keep at both because it reminds of what the students may experience in my class. I found it makes me more patient as they struggle with unfamiliar concepts or skills. I encourage you to learn new skill as it keeps you humble and helps you remember what it is like to not understand a simple concept. It helps you recognize that the frustration the student demonstrates may not be directed at you after all but rather a manifestation of their frustration at not being able to grasp a concept when it has been easy to do so with other concepts in the past.

Don’t be afraid to take a risk. At worst, you can demonstrate for students that you can laugh at yourself and learn from your mistakes, and at best, you will create a meaningful learning experience. This semester I decided to add a new learning activity and assessment to a course I teach on professional ethics. In the past I tested the students on the material using a multiple choice or true/false format. This semester I decided to have the students create a concept map that would entail pulling together everything they had learned on professional ethics, their personal value system and general ethical principles. I made stakes low in that I told the students if I determined that the class as an aggregate did poorly on the assignment, I would drop the points. My hope was that the trust I had established with the students earlier in the course would carry us through. It did. It was dicey at times and I learned how to make the process smoother in the future. I was torn about how much direction to give as I wanted the final product to be meaningful for them instead of me. I learned that a little more direction about content area inclusion were necessary. I made the change on the fly and the students felt more comfortable with the process.

The students constructed a personal concept map on how they would make professional ethical decisions and brought that map to class. During class time, they had to collaborate with a classmate and create a concept map that would meet their personal values, ethical principles and professional values and standards. I was there to answer questions and calm fears. The concept maps were as varied as the students – some were very linear and others were colorful and very creative. Student feedback was very positive. They all felt they were more connected with their ethical decision-making than they would have been if they only studied the concepts for a test. Some did not enjoy the creativity piece but still learned from it. Others said they felt refreshed by the activity and discovered how challenging it is to come to consensus even with people with similar values. I was thrilled with the outcome. I have to admit, I was scared to death to try something so radical but being open to adaptations in the process made it possible. It was so much fun to be in a classroom where everyone was actively engaged in the learning process! The noise was great and the questions and synthesis of information was beyond my hopes. Yes, it could have gone differently but the teaching high I experienced and the learning that occurred made the risk well worthwhile.

Hold the joy that you feel when a learning opportunity goes well in your heart and use it on the less stellar days. Use the skills you have learned through the CUTS program to help your confidence. Stay connected with the students, listen to them. Learn to trust the students to be honest with you. They will be – sometimes painfully so. But that is how you will grow as a teacher. Each day, **be** the best person you can because you don’t know which student on which day will take away a meaning from the class that is so much more important than you planned. Love what you are doing because we are given the gift of making a difference in another person’s life.

Thank you. I wish you much success in your vocation as a teacher.