

**University of Calgary Teaching Awards 2016**  
**Sample Teaching Philosophy Statement**  
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**Teaching Philosophy**

A momentous occasion happened in class this week. The young woman who always sits in the back row with her arms folded across her chest raised her hand in response to my question about one of the people discussed in our reading for the day. It was such a tentative movement I had to look twice to ascertain she actually had raised her hand. “Yes, Samira?” In an almost-whisper she said “He felt empowered.”

Why does this fall into the category of momentous? Because Samira (not her real name) has never, in three years at university, spoken in the classroom. Because Samira was so dismayed by my explanation of our classroom as a participatory space where we each have something to teach and something to learn that she almost dropped the class. Because Samira could not believe the premise behind the participatory classroom pertained to her; all students have value and intelligence, and part of our task together is to believe this and act on it.

In moments like this I feel the magic of the participatory classroom. I’m aware of the rewards that come to my students personally and communally when they take the risk of participating. I garner more evidence that I am on the right track by inviting students to take the risk.

***Participatory Classroom***

The term ‘participatory classroom’ is at the heart of my teaching philosophy. The verb participate means to share in the creation of, to take part in. I invite students to work together, to see themselves as active members of a community focused on learning. I emphasize that, in contrast to the understanding of the classroom as a place where the teacher imparts appropriate knowledge into the empty minds of students, we move from different premises: the focal point of our work together is the course material (not me); approaching our course material with curiosity, openness, and respect yields deep, positive, and often unexpected results; believing we all have something to teach and something to learn creates an authentic learning space.

Creating a participatory classroom is fundamental to my teaching philosophy, grounded in two principles that are deeply connected and inter-related. First is my concern about the general state of my students’ self-esteem, their ubiquitous lack of belief in themselves as persons of value who have something to contribute to our classroom and to the world generally. Second is my belief that the educational space is at its best when all of us work together to create a vibrant learning community based on shared understanding, collaborative learning, and respect for the classroom and everyone in it.

It took me years of teaching to come to this place. Certainly my struggles in the classroom, as I attempted to create a style that worked for me and for my students, provided critical knowledge. In addition to that, the most helpful resource that allowed me to crystallize my ideas is Parker Palmer’s book *The Courage to Teach*. Parker claims that until we know ourselves and which type of classroom aligns with our character, we can’t become the teacher we are meant to be. I

now know that my own unique blend of care for my students; belief in social justice and compassion as teachable traits; understanding of my skills as facilitator and active listener and learner; and overall trust in an engaged learning process allows me to facilitate a vivid classroom experience that serves my individual students and serves us as a group.

### *Connecting with my students*

The participatory classroom means we have to bond with each other; I model this through actions in the classroom such as knowing students' names and showing interest in their ideas. These connections are strengthened by my efforts to meet with students one-on-one. Making time for these appointments is not easy, but it is important and worth the extra effort. The more vital the link I have with each student, the stronger our group becomes. I foster these links in several ways. First, I hold office hours at least twice a week and make it clear to students (in writing and verbally) that I can set up a different time to meet if office hours don't work. This lets them know I am available to them. Second, for those who are not ready to meet in person, I respond to emails in a timely fashion, typically within 24 hours, and I keep a sharp eye out for any phrase in the email that might be hinting at a desire to talk, to say something more. Lastly, I reach out to students who make personal disclosures during class discussion or in their writing assignments; for example, students may broach the topic of their sexual assault or racist harassment. Their sharing is an act of bravery that deserves a personalized response on my part. Often I am the first person to hear about the racism they are facing in their work environment, the sexual abuse they are experiencing within their intimate relationships, and their identity as a member of the LGBT+ community. Because of my status as a community organizer, volunteer, and activist, I am able to offer students information about community resources for such issues, as well as support and validation. In other words, I see my role not only as educator but as facilitator and advocate for student self-awareness. My ability to engender trust in my students comes through to them through what I do and say in the classroom, and outside of it. I take their trust seriously.

### *Self-awareness*

Creating a participatory classroom involves hard work and commitment, and students get a sense of the hard work involved on the first day, when I share the 'bad news' with them: I have a Student Agreement outlining my guidelines for our time together, and one guideline has to do with bringing full attention to the classroom at all times. This Agreement, I emphasize, is a written one that they need to sign.

And so we begin our journey together, talking about why and how I have come to believe in the Agreement, and its importance. Right from the first day, students realize something is happening here that may not have happened in other classes; they are being asked to share in the responsibility of creating a participatory classroom, to let go of unproductive habits they have used in other places, and to strengthen their own self-awareness about their learning and their peers' learning.

During that first discussion, I pose questions to students about my policies. For example, I ask them to consider my strict policy about no cellphone use. Why don't I allow them? Why might it help the learning process to have cellphones off and away? Are there any good reasons why a handful of students might need to access their cellphones? If yes, how can we

accommodate those needs and still set up a focused group? After asking them to engage with these questions, I share with them the importance of a classroom setting with the central focus being our course material, as opposed to attention divided between course material and electronic devices. And thus one aspect of the participatory classroom is set: the importance of a group whose members are present in body and mind, and whose attention is fully given to each other and the subject matter.

### ***Honouring different learning styles***

I follow a standard protocol for the first class of a session: the student code of conduct is reviewed, students talk to each other about why they're in the class, a short writing exercise takes place, and an audio-visual clip is played. ("Sit tight now," I warn them, in a mock serious tone, "We're going to do something I bet few of you have ever done – listen to a lesbian feminist folksinger!") Thus, the tone is set, and students have been welcomed into the class through a variety of activities directed to distinct learning styles. I let students know that it is my intention to use a variety of learning styles in the hopes of finding styles that will work for each of them, and in the hopes that mixing up the format will keep each of us focused and engaged. I end this discussion of learning styles with another joke: "In addition to all the activities we took part in today, you can also expect to have the wonderful opportunity to engage in role playing and creating public service announcements based on our reading for the day!" My goal is that within three weeks, students will be on with the participatory classroom and willing to take risks with activities like these.

### ***Critical thinking skills***

Another aspect of the participatory classroom that comes to the fore throughout the term is my explicit attempt to strengthen students' critical thinking skills (which I also refer to as holistic thinking skills). I tell students that in our work to strengthen these skills around the issues we explore, we search for the deepest understanding possible. We attempt to perceive the whole picture, the context. We work together to develop these skills; analyzing articles, images, ads, poems, lectures, songs, and music videos in order to decode/deconstruct all meanings within the work, to understand the ideas and values being espoused, and to raise questions. Through group development of these skills I am able to reinforce an important message: My role is not to teach you what to think, but to help you unearth and strengthen your own critical thinking skills so you know how to think. This clarity is particularly important within the field of Women's Studies. One of many unfortunate misconceptions about this discipline is that Women's Studies teachers are bent on 'forcing' students to think as we do, to believe what we believe. As we do our critical thinking work in the classroom, and students are able to see that a wide variety of interpretations are supported and respected by me, they are able to appreciate the truth in my statement about wanting to help students gain the skills to think for themselves.

### ***Student resistance***

It is inevitable that, given the issues I deal with in the classroom, there will be student resistance and push-back. This comes in all forms; disbelief that racism still exists, that LGBT+ folks still experience hostility, that women are treated as sex objects, that poor people can't move

up the class ladder through hard work. I normalize disagreement and conflict at the beginning of the term, and invite students to share the disagreements publicly. This means that we can deal with conflict and disagreement openly. However, I insist that discussion of inequity and discrimination be evidence-based – a guiding principle included in my Student Code of Conduct. It is important that I be ready to discuss controversial material and hear multiple perspectives, while guiding the discussion in a respectful, thoughtful, questioning manner.

The first response I offer when a student raises the belief that racism still exists is to invite the entire group to consider the evidence we have studied thus far in the semester that lays out factual information. My second is inviting the disbelieving student to engage in appropriate investigative work on their own. I recall the time one student took me up on this invitation, after she told me how irritated she was by one of the ideas expressed in Marilyn Frye's article *Oppression*. According to this student, Frye's discussion of the door-opening ritual was completely inaccurate, and no one attached any importance to men opening doors for women. I first asked her to clarify and say more about her critique of this idea, and then asked her if she was open to spending a week opening doors for men. This anecdotal evidence, I told her, would be a good starting point for her to refute Frye's belief. A week later she shared the results with all of us. Men had responded with hostility, incredulity, and a refusal to walk through the door when she opened it, her own boyfriend had started an argument with her in the hallway. She was dismayed by this and wanted to read more about feminist analysis of social rituals. It was a great learning experience for the whole group, and confirmed my theory that one important way to deal with student resistance and/or disagreement is to invite them to investigate the issue further from the position of marginalized subject rather than their own privilege.

### ***The participatory classroom allows for a change in direction***

Not every group grabs the reins of the participatory classroom and runs with it; one class in the fall of 2015 steadfastly refused to take the plunge into the depths of the participatory classroom. I realized this in the fourth week of class, and was able to set up a feedback session to get input from the students. They spent 30 minutes writing about what was working for them in the participatory classroom, what was not working for them, and what suggestions for change they had. There was a consistent pattern in the responses; members of this group felt comfortable in the small groups in a way they did not feel in the large group. They wanted more time in the small-group discussions, and they wanted more time to organize their thoughts before moving into the large group. I was able to integrate this feedback into our work; for the next two classes, we did not engage in a large-group discussion and they had more time in small groups. As I visited each group, I got a sense that they were indeed working well in the small groups. For the remainder of the term, they continued to have more time in small groups, and to have a few minutes before large-group discussions. I also set up more check-ins for the group, both written and verbal, so that I was able to track how well the different formats were working.