

## **Part II: Teaching Dossier**

### **2.0. Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness**

#### **2.1. Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

**Personal Experiences.** My teaching philosophy has developed from my personal and professional experiences both in and out of the classroom. In 1986, I left high school prematurely and began a career in the Canadian military. Although I had good potential for advancement, I soon became disappointed about my educational decisions and believed that I had a greater capacity to learn. After four years, I left the military to begin my university education as a mature student. During my six years acquiring two bachelor's degrees (English Literature and History), I encountered dozens of professors in multiple disciplines. Some were great public speakers, some were highly organized, and some exuded confidence and knowledge, without being intimidating or condescending. Some communicated infectious enthusiasm, some encouraged group projects, and some used technology to recognize the different learning modes of students. And one, in particular, saw potential in me that I did not see in myself, and mentored me through several years of undergraduate training. It was as a student in these classrooms that I learned how teaching might be done well. More than anything, these professors taught me that it was more important to teach than to merely instruct.

**Andragogy versus Pedagogy.** As a student in an undergraduate Sociology of Education course, I was introduced to the work of Malcolm Knowles and learned that pedagogy (teaching children to learn) and andragogy (teaching adults to learn) are not the same thing. I believe that at the university level it is paramount for teachers to recognize that the students are adult learners, that they have a proven capacity and willingness to learn, and that there are many pressures placed upon them and their time. This means that the students have to be treated as mature, active learners, and teachers have to recognize their roles as facilitators of an adult's desire to learn beyond the mere content of a course and into the realities of their everyday life, thus helping to develop the whole person.

**Firm, Fair, and Flexible.** In supporting an adult's desire to learn, I believe that teachers need to be firm, fair, and flexible: Firm, because some students need deadlines and strict assessment models to succeed; fair because it is a basic entitlement and because students are still immersed in a learning process; and flexible because life sometimes gets in the way, and students—especially adult learners—need to feel that their educational environment respects growth, maturity, and life events. When a student approaches me with a problem, I feel it is essential to give it a fair hearing and offer solutions and strategies that will allow him or her to handle their difficulties while also staying on track to complete the course. A student recently approached me who, as a result of his work schedule and his activities as a student athlete, had failed to complete the two written assignments in my class. We sat down, discussed how his time management might be improved, reset deadlines for the assignments, and came to a practical solution that allowed him to complete the course. To me, this was an exercise in empathy from which both the student and I emerged the better.

**Empathy.** I believe that a key role of teaching in all humanities and social sciences disciplines is to create empathy amongst an active, participatory citizenry that has not been overly influenced by tradition, dogma, or parochialism. As a historian, I believe that teaching involves engaging meaningfully with the past not so much to learn from earlier mistakes and not repeat them—which historians generally consider to be a fallacy—but to encourage students to understand complex cause and effect relationships, how and why things change, and the extent to which they remain the

same. I think it is important for students to understand that the past was a different society, and that modern-day perspectives are not always an appropriate vantage point from which to view the past. This position helps students better understand the diversity of opinion that exists throughout the world today. They can view other societies, cultures, religions, and ideas not solely from the lens of their own experience, or on narrow assertions of “right” and “wrong”, but rather based on the historical, social, and cultural development of those societies. To accomplish these goals students must actively engage with history, and with each other.

**Active Learning and Collaboration.** Probably the single biggest lesson I have learned as a teacher has been to cast aside the urge to deliver vast amounts of content—a surface learning activity—and instead to engage with students in deep, meaningful, and sustaining ways that will enable them to learn material and practice core disciplinary skills on their own, long after their classroom work has ended. I recognize that all students are different, and thus learning needs to be an active, incremental process that recognizes development in students, allows students to make errors and missteps while in a receptive environment that does not judge too harshly or exact severe repercussions, and enables students to demonstrate the extent of their creative and intellectual capital. Active learning also means, as Chickering and Gamson have written, that learning cannot be a spectator sport. I don’t think that students can simply learn material through lectures. They must debate it, criticize it, contextualize it, and live it. This means that, when properly guided by a teacher, active learning is the most effective when it becomes a collaborative partnership between teachers and learners, both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Setting Examples.** I am confident that students learn best by example, which is why I believe that at the university level, teachers should be active in their discipline and communicate their expertise and enthusiasm for the material. Too often, teaching and research are seen as distinct and sometimes antagonistic roles within universities, whereas I think that doing both well is the most advantageous to students and teachers. Setting examples means showing students that their professors have been and currently are invested in—though not consumed by—their own research, so that teachers can explain how inquiry is undertaken, the methods involved, the problems that are encountered, how these are overcome, and the rewards associated with making contributions to their discipline. A key to my approach to teaching is my belief that it is my job not only to explain concepts and methods to students, but also to model the application of these ideas. I believe that modeling is a vital tool in helping students develop critical and abstract thinking skills, experience with analyzing and organizing data, and superior communication skills. Put simply, I believe in the philosophy of “do as I do”, rather than “do as I say”.

**Reading the Students.** I believe that good teachers are receptive to the needs of their students and endeavour to fulfill them. This is not the same as giving students what they want. All classes and students are different, which demands that a teacher be, above all, able to read the class at several levels—individually, globally, and vocationally—and teach in a way that a wide range of students can benefit from. Sometimes, this means altering a presentation strategy on a moment’s notice and reacting or improvising based on student queries, facial expressions, attention levels, and knowledge base. In my opinion, intransigence—a sign that the teacher lacks empathy—and the belief in a single-model system, are major weaknesses when it comes to teaching. This means that good teachers are always growing and evolving, and thus we must continually observe and listen to our students, critically reflect on our teaching, pass on successful strategies to others as a constant dialogue, and receive feedback from others about how they approached different situations and teaching opportunities. In sum, I am convinced that university teachers must employ the same degree of scholarly inquiry and engagement in their teaching as they do in their research.