

University of Calgary Teaching Awards

Sample Teaching Philosophy Statement

by Brian Smith, Recipient of the Full-Time Academic Staff (Professor) Award, 2016

SECTION I: PHILOSOPHY

My philosophy of teaching has two foundational pillars. One is based in the idea of a community of learners. The second is related to the root meaning of education: *educ*—a leading or drawing out. Both have their genesis in my earliest experiences of life and schooling.

I began my formal education in a two-room schoolhouse in rural Nova Scotia. Being part of a multi-graded classroom, I experienced an approach to teaching that involved the harmonious coordination of diverse groups, and a style of learning that often occurred through the dissolution of barriers. My earliest recollection is the teacher's insistence on cooperation. Older students helped me with my work; I listened in on Grade 6 geography while doing my Grade 1 sums; and the room seemed perpetually alive with intersection, exchange and possibility. When, on special evenings, the teachers arranged the showing of a film or staged a concert attended by parents and students alike, I was made acutely aware of the school as an essential, benign place, and teaching as an activity that nurtured and sustained the whole community. These early experiences in community have had a profound effect on my own educational practice.

The second pillar of my philosophy is rooted in the individual, and is directly linked to my personal experience as the middle of seven children in a rural family of scant resources. In the busy and noisy environment of our home, I learned to listen and, from my middle position, to see more than one side to a problem. Perhaps because I was quiet and introverted, teachers seemed to look out for me. Over the years, they helped me become who I am. They encouraged me and gave me confidence. They drew out the best in me. Perhaps I was destined to be a teacher, but my high school teachers sealed the deal by appointing me a tutor to students who were having difficulty learning. Helping others in this way gave me intense satisfaction. It was through the guidance of teachers that I attained scholarships enabling me to attend university. It was the influence of teachers and mentors that launched me on my first job as a teacher. It was a teacher who first urged me to try out for a play, encouraging an artistic inclination that led me to my profession.

For me, then, teaching is a giving back.

My teaching is sustained by an intense desire to bring out the best in people and to bring people together in community. In the first instance, the *micro* dimension of my teaching, performance is investigated and enacted on the floor of a studio. I consider myself privileged that my discipline takes as its central focus the experience of being human. Thus my students explore their own humanity as they investigate models of human experience presented by world dramatic literature and their own dramatic creations. I am dedicated to encouraging and drawing out the individual creativity of my students, which is directly connected to their unique qualities as human beings. So, in every class I try to create a special atmosphere of playfulness, trust, mutual acknowledgment and questioning pursuit. In this creative atmosphere, students work in large and smaller groups to solve complex human problems together as they learn experientially. They acquire the transferable skills of creative, collaborative action. At the same time, they absorb the professional ethics of the theatre, which include the principles of respect, honesty and mutual support required in face-to-face human encounter.

In the second instance, the *macro* dimension, my teaching frequently widens its range and focus to serve as the catalyst for complex events that bring together diverse groups in creation and learning. Here I exploit the power of Drama as a flexible learning medium that dissolves barriers and creates community. The central focus of such events is usually provided by the staging of a play. As director/teacher in these circumstances, my immediate task is the transmission of artistic knowledge. However, teaching in this context has a larger purpose, which is to nurture, enable and jointly bring together the gifts of all participants, so that the insights and contributions of each are enriched and deepened by those of all the others. In events such as these, which

will be further articulated in Section II of my dossier, my teaching is generative, and the learning outcomes emerge from a broad band of experiences and interactions. While my teaching in these cases is intended to provide a cohesive experience, ultimately it serves to *incite* a range of independent contributions and to provide a resonant space where learning is multiplied as participants complement, challenge and celebrate one another through communal action.