

University of Calgary Teaching Awards

Teaching Philosophy Statement

By Lisa Stowe, Recipient of the Award for Experiential Learning Initiatives - 2016

Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results. (John Dewey)

One of the most formative moments in my teaching career happened when I was graduate TA in a Memorial University travel study program to Great Britain, called Literature and Landscape. As a TA, I was responsible for teaching T.S. Eliot's stage play, *Murder in the Cathedral* to a group of English undergraduates. Because it was a course that focused on literature and landscape we had the opportunity to visit Canterbury Cathedral, the setting for Eliot's play. I thought it would be fun to do a play reading while at the Cathedral. I assigned the students roles and we completed a full reading while moving around the Cathedral (and around other tourists) according to Eliot's stage directions. The words were powerful, but I was more struck by the sensory power of location -- the smell of incense, wood and wax, the cacophony of our conversation echoing throughout the caen stone hallways, and the feel of the chilly air as we 'performed' the play in the location where it was set. That sensory experience has stayed with me throughout my teaching career and informs a lot of how I teach in the classroom and beyond.

At the University of Calgary I teach mostly Communication Studies classes that help prepare COMS graduates for work in the Communications field. Often my students go onto to become public relations specialists, policy analysts or communications managers. The overall goal of my classes, however, is more than just job preparation. I want students to acquire the tools and more importantly, the desire, enthusiasm and interest for life-long learning. My emphasis on collaborative teaching techniques, active classrooms, inquiry based assignments and experiential learning and reflection shows my students how they are a part of their own learning process. They learn by doing. I believe that students need to understand their roles as active learners to hone the introspective and critical skills necessary to challenge their own assumptions and behaviours in order to understand and navigate the world they live in. I also want my students to respect each other and to have enthusiasm for the subjects they study. I model both enthusiasm for my courses and respect for my students to help them understand how important those two elements are in a learning environment.

“I gained great real world knowledge and experience.” (COMS 463 Winter 2014 student)

Despite class sizes that range from 280 to 12, I encourage, through course objectives and purposeful assignment design, the idea of praxis or the idea that theoretical concepts are best understood through experiential application and that experiential learning is made significant with theoretical reflection. Class content and academic material is important -- a student must be able to see how a particular subject matter is academically important and connected to the disciplinary field. But regardless of class size, students should not only ‘hear’ course content through lectures or discussion, but they should also ‘experience’ those concepts through experiential learning style assignments. Whether it is a field trip to understand the complexity of local and global food systems, the design of a usability test to collect primary data on the effectiveness of websites, or the in-class delivery of a Speech to Persuade, I feel students learn better by experiencing for themselves the subject’s theoretical concepts.

“The reflections helped me grow and to learn from my experiences.” (CMCL 507 Winter 2014 student)

Additionally, to fully appreciate experiential learning there must be space for reflection. I build in these spaces either through formal reflective essays or less formal class discussion where we unpack the experiential tasks. When students understand the connection between reflection and practice and see how powerful such a combination be, then they can understand how learning can take place beyond the walls of a university in their everyday lives.

Measuring how effective my experiential learning objectives are in helping students become life-long learners is difficult. I can see some effectiveness in my USRI scores. All my USRIs show high scores in ‘overall instruction,’ ‘level of enthusiasm’ and ‘treats students with respect.’ For me this indicates that the importance of having enthusiasm about learning and respecting all those in the classroom is highly recognized. The more qualitative measurement of my success is determined by the level of enthusiasm, activity and energy in my classroom. If there is a lot of discussion and engagement between students then I know they actively building a learning community. I also hear from students years after a course is completed that they enjoyed my courses because of that learning community and that those active learning activities coupled with discussion, allowed them to formulate concrete understanding of sometimes very abstract concepts.

“The instructor is enthusiastic and cares about students. Is very respectful.” (COMS 463 Winter 2014 student)

I teach to give students tools to make them become more active and engaged students in the short term and to give them the skills and awareness necessary to make them life-long learners in the long term, including developing an enthusiasm for learning. Learning should not end when the course is over; students should feel they have the ability to take those insights about their own learning shaped in a classroom beyond the the walls of the university as they make their way through their lives.