

A note on teaching...

It was never my plan to become a teacher. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Colorado, I had classes in auditoriums with hundreds of other students and when I reached the upper division level of courses I was blessed with instructors who were published and revered in their fields...and were awful instructors. I did not pursue a career in my degree and was fortunate to have a skillset in another area that enabled me to make a living. Upon retirement in that career I came back to school and came to Pikes Peak Community College in search of a new skillset. At that point, my experience was completely different. I had a reawakening towards education and a renewed perspective. Getting past the stigma of “postsecondary education” as a lower form of collegial learning, I became inspired with the mission statement of community college¹ in general which involved instructors from their industry bringing life experiences into the classroom and teaching elements that had a clear connection to the world surrounding the institution. I found the philosophy of community college embraces the real world and I found a resonance in my direction and that of the school. Having been a world traveler and someone who found a passion in his profession, I found a place to share my experiences in a way to foster the growth and potential in people who are seeking a pathway similar to what I have found – passion in the subject and a clear path to obtain mastery.

The five failures

My experience in my undergraduate degree was tarnished by the following elements:

- Failure to associate the learning material with the purpose
- Instructors, either Teacher Assistants or Professors hired for their field expertise, who’s main purpose is not teaching but are required to perform the task as a condition for university employment
- A lack of oversight over the Professors and a professional risk that results in an atmosphere of apathy or an unwillingness to improve their pedagogy
- No attempt to discover new ways or technologies to expand possibilities in learning styles
- Academic rigor was highly enforced, but student retention was almost entirely ignored

From these failures, I have developed my own teaching philosophy as a solution to overcome these issues. Granted, I was in a popular program where the student/teacher ratio was highly unbalanced, but therein lies my first discovery of pedagogical success – Smaller classrooms.

The solutions

Small classes open a world of engagement.² No one will be lost and experience a sense of displacement with successful teachers. Not only will students have open communication with their instructor, but with their fellow classmates as well. Their voice will not be lost in the crowd and this lends to one of the most important solutions to the first instructional failure that I experienced. Learning a successful strategy in communication is one of the core values that many times is lost in the educational system. It is a fact in the professional world, that most successful people are good communicators and there is no better place to engender this skillset

when in a classroom that allows a student the opportunity to be heard by the instructor and his or her peers. This will either create confidence in their ability to speak or an awareness that there is a deficiency. The first failure in association of the classroom and purpose is an avoidance of real-world strategies. No matter the skillset, without networking capabilities and confidence in communication a student will suffer an unfortunate handicap.

I am very enthusiastic teaching in an area that focusses on self-promotion as a core value. Many strategies are self-evident in our field and can be simulated in the classroom. These include:

- Presentations before fellow students with an open forum of discussion and critiques
- Real world situations where professionals participate and students learn to speak with them directly
- Formation of teams to discover solutions and work out a hierarchy amongst themselves
- Participation in community competitions that allow exposure to professionals and businesses
- Involvement in actual client projects within a safe educational environment, but with an actual risk

Much of the learning takes place outside of the classroom, and in our discipline, we endeavor to foster these situations to their full potential. We can do this because we are within the scope of our classroom size and student/teacher ratio.

There is a great balance between the industry and our instructors. As a full-time instructor, I still work with clients and projects and I continue to bring those experiences in the classroom. The importance of this avoids the second failure in a way that keeps my material fresh and relevant. The students learn what is at stake by examining the process in real time. I also, come into the classroom with constant new material as our industry requirements constantly change and I can stay ahead of the curve. Students have an awareness that the material is relevant and never feel disenfranchised by a lack of awareness of current trends.

There is always something at risk for me as an instructor. I have been a professional artist for most of my life and I am excited to be in a field where being an artist is an essential element. For artists, failure isn't just a risk in a financial sense, but also on personal level of self-worth. Our students are the same, and there is a drive to succeed for the sake of attaining confidence and completion in their artistry. It is a blessing and a curse, but it demands that we strive to excel. My teaching is wrapped up in the urgency of fostering this element so that students will build a strong enough foundation to continue to strive without reaching a point of disillusionment. There are no judgements on strong efforts, but opportunities for growth. I work to take all student endeavors as successes in which I strive to use as teaching-moments.

To best describe this, I recall a student in a web design course I taught a couple of years ago which is a highly technical class that for most students are out of their comfort zone. He struggled with an assignment and was clearly distressed. The most important thing I could do was give him attention and opportunities to succeed. The options I gave him were:

- Office time
- Links to other resources outside of the class materials
- Time with other students

Most importantly, I communicated that it was the effort and not the result that was important to me and I showed him that I cared about his success as a human being over that of the technical material. He no longer felt that he was achieving this as an assignment, but as a personal goal. It was a struggle for him, but in the end, he succeeded and boosted his confidence. There are many times I could have lost him, but I never showed a lack of faith or attention. I avoided any instances where I displayed a loss of faith in him and therefore he never lost his own faith in himself. This is not an easy task for an instructor, but it's a sense of my own artistry that I realize what's at stake for a student and the fear that they may lose their own artistry in my class. That would be a great failure indeed.

I struggle with academic rigor. I know it's importance and how it increases a student's fortitude. I also understand the importance of retention. As a student, I mastered the ability to fall asleep in class by balancing my head on my arm in class and make it seem I was paying attention. Later I discovered the importance of coffee for my academic success. As an instructor, I realized that I had to find a beneficial balance. Again, I'm lucky that I teach in a field that is technical and artistic, and consequently many solutions exist. There are many ways to present important information:

- Lecture
- Videos
- Reading
- Web sites
- Multimedia Platforms
- Guest speakers
- Real world clients and projects
- Visual aids
- Tutorials

And I use them all. However, I also run into an issue of overstimulation. So, during all this I present a clear focus on the objective. I use personal web pages with links in list format to state assignments and resource materials. This way the student has access to all information all the time. It is a constant effort and not always successful. But balance is the key and if the student has clear objectives stated in a way that is always accessible, I have found that they are generally successful in learning the material which in many ways is very technical and highly coveted in the industry.

I am very inspired by my experience in Community College, and though I am not trying to disparage four-year or graduate school, I have found a place that adheres to my own personal philosophy of the teaching and learning experience. I am proud of the students that I teach and of my fellow instructors who are all actively engaged in the industry. We all bring our experiences into the classroom and benefit from each other. It is a safe world, but it is a challenging world as well. And in that balance, I find that it is a successful world.



1. <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/About/Pages/mission.aspx>
2. <http://education.seattlepi.com/small-college-class-size-benefits-1269.html>
<https://ucat.osu.edu/professional-development/teaching-portfolio/philosophy/>