

## Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Curriculum and Teaching

Theory.... Practice.... Praxis.... Pedagogy.... As a graduate student and novice teacher, these terms were thrown about as forms of cultural and intellectual capital that separated the theorists from the practitioners. If you were a theorist you understood that all four terms were interrelated, or, that was what we'd understood from reading people like Freire, Bourdieu, and Lather. If you were a practitioner (in our program that meant you were "just a teacher"), you'd heard the words, perhaps used them, and were predominantly anti-theory because in your mind it had no real-world application. As someone who wanted to be and do it all--theory, practice, practice, and pedagogy—I found myself trapped in two worlds that while not outright enemies, certainly held an uneasy truce with one another. The irony of that is how such an uneasy relationship can limit the possibility of understanding that we can gain from both worlds. Michelle Fine calls that divide "the hyphen," the distance researchers (in particular) sustain to maintain intellectual, psychological, and cultural distance between themselves and those they study. In the case of the theorist/practitioner divide, it is sad to think of the opportunities lost for learning.

In all honesty, I continue to grapple with how we connect theory, practice, praxis, and pedagogy. As a teacher educator, it is important for me to model how these ideas come to together in my classroom. It is hard, however, to make that explicit to students, particularly since they are still experiencing teaching in the abstract. It is even harder to get students to understand that every decision they make regarding teaching, learning, and knowledge, evolves from a core set of beliefs that they have about themselves, their students, and the world in general. As these beliefs become more sophisticated, they begin to mirror many of the theories that already exist. At the same time, students come to our classrooms with deeply embedded theories about the nature of the world, teaching, and learning. These theories, while not necessarily representative of those of the academy, still shape what these future teachers will do in their classrooms. That I understand that theory and practice live side by side in my classroom is one thing. To make it transparent so that students can see it is another matter. And, engaging students to explore their own theories as they put them into practice requires challenging their very core understandings of how teaching becomes teaching.

I am a critical educator, one who engages her students in understanding that knowledge itself is not given; rather, it is constructed in the interactions between individuals within a given social and cultural setting. Theoretically grounding myself in a critically reflective practice for democratic culturally sensitive education also calls for developing a framework with students so that together we might critically investigate our worlds in order transform them. Further, in engaging students in democratic practices, it is my ultimate hope that they will see themselves as socially responsible, working for social justice for and with their future students, and that everything they do is meaningful.

As an educator, I find myself in engaging in constant critical self-reflection in order to revisit and improve upon my own practice. I'm always thinking about what we've done in class, what worked, and what could have (and should have) been done differently to change the

learning experience within the community. As such, my classroom is a crucible for me, and I try to engage students in interrogating practices in our classroom as well as the many others of which they have been a part. On the one hand, I want them to understand that critique is a valuable part of the learning experience, particularly when it results in change. On the other hand, interrogating our own (e.g., all members of the learning community) practices engages students in considering how the classroom is representative of larger social and economic issues that exist in American society. It requires us to consider the ways in which we can challenge certain aspects of the learning process and knowledge in order to consider as well as enact alternatives.

Choosing to live the theories that shape my practice also means that the practices in which I engage alter the theories that are the basis of how I teach. Quite literally, I am striving to embody praxis, and that can be a very uncomfortable state in which to exist. On some days, it calls for a level of discomfort that is very difficult to face, particularly given the fact that I find many of my students still want me to tell them the “right answers.” How can I do that when I am still learning them myself? So, instead of telling them that there are no right answers, I instead engage them in thinking about what possibilities exist, and how we as teachers, are responsible for challenging our students in thinking about what is, as well as what could be.

Living in dissonance is rarely fun for my students or me. Some think that I am waffling; others question whether I know what I am doing, particularly at the beginning of the course. The power in making my own struggles transparent comes later, when students enter the classroom as teachers and finally understand that my efforts at transparency were designed to help them to see the types of choices we have to make during the course of the day. As for my own discomfort, I find that “teaching in dissonance” enables me to stay on my toes. Even as I am teaching I am weighing every response I make to students, every choice I make regarding how I facilitate the discussion. I also find that I pay very close attention to how students respond to each other, the types of questions they ask and the body language they use with each other. As a result, I can introduce into the conversation aspects of the discussion that might otherwise be absent.

I believe it is essential to balance the content we teach with the context in which we teach. To that end, it is necessary that students of education not only have a solid grounding in the content area in which they will teach, but they must also have an understanding of issues relevant to classroom organization, management, curriculum development, and instruction. At the same time that we prepare teachers and leaders of education to be experts in their content areas, they must also be able to recognize the unique needs and resources of the communities in which they work. Therefore it is crucial that teacher educators themselves have extensive experience working in schools **with** teachers, students and their families, and other community members to create collaborative relationships that focus on the strengths of those communities and continue to engage in the struggle for social justice.

As a critical educator, I strive to create a classroom environment in which students are encouraged to interrogate their assumptions about teaching and learning, the students with whom they work, their roles as teachers shaping the future, and the importance of social action. As a result, every course that I have taught at the college level has been grounded in a critical multicultural framework in which students are encouraged to explore the many issues related to teaching in diverse settings so that they too see that they are intricately involved in challenging inequality. At the same time, I strive to make explicit for students my expectations, including the notion that they don't have to agree with them. Rather, they must develop their own

understanding of teaching and learning, the social context, and their roles, and be able to support their perspectives with research, practice, and reflection.

Even as I think about the content that and context in which we teach, I am drawn to thinking about the bigger picture. Given recent political events, particularly the advent of No Child Left Behind, it is more important than ever that future teachers explore before their professional semester what effects such legislation will have on their classroom practices. It would be naïve and unethical of me to tell students that they can simply close their doors and it will be business as usual. It is also important for me to illustrate to students that while what happens in the classroom is important, there are things beyond the classroom that will profoundly shape what it is that they will be able to do. In fact, there may be a number of things they will be required to do that go against their theoretical and philosophical. I cannot tell them what decisions to make; the only thing I can do is help students think through the options, and encourage them to work with others to change what they don't agree with.

In addition to understanding how to prepare future educators, it is also crucial that I continue my own studies as a scholar. Thus, I believe that it is necessary to continue to conduct an active research agenda that examines not only how high school students engage with classroom curriculum as they construct their identities, but how teachers themselves engage with the curriculum they develop, in order to better understand how their assumptions about students, content knowledge, and curriculum development shape the type of classroom environment they create. Therefore, even as I instruct students in my own classroom, I continue to explore my own assumptions regarding teaching and learning in order to consider how I shape my students' perceptions of education. By continuing to conduct an active research agenda, I hope to further my knowledge base regarding how students and teachers come to understand the relationship between knowledge construction, the context in which we teach, and how students and teachers come to understand themselves as actors able to work for social change in American society.

It goes without saying that my research agenda continues to shape my classroom practices, classroom conversations, and the projects I chose to assign students. In the past three years, my research with student and novice teachers has taught me much about the challenges they face and how they overcome these challenges. I have also been reminded about how life-altering becoming a teacher can be for many people. The reality of being a teacher can be very different from one's expectations, and learning to accept the differences can be very difficult. I also find that my research makes me more aware of how quickly the face of public education changes, yet still remains the same. Thus, my research enables me to provide real examples in class of the changes and how students, teachers, schools, and society are responding to or initiating those changes.

I believe that my experiences enable me to better understand the ways in which future teachers must be prepared to teach in an ever-changing society. Not only must future teachers competently work with state, local, and professional standards in their subject areas, but they must also be able to critically interrogate the limits of those standards as they relate to the ethics of teaching learners of different languages, cultures, races, and abilities. Further, my interest in democratic education requires me to engage in my own reflective practices as I develop, implement, and assess curriculum in my own classroom to understand how I might facilitate or impede the process. In doing so, it is my hope to model for my students how they themselves might begin to think of themselves as reflective practitioners and life-long learners who are engaged in an on-going process to shape the future

Finally, I recently realized that I needed to model something new for my students: how to maintain one's idealism in spite of daunting challenges. Because learning to be and being a teacher can be such a challenge, it is crucial that future and in-service teachers not lose hope. Nor can they give up the belief that they can do great things with their students regardless of whatever roadblocks they might encounter. It is not enough to see the light in their eyes when students are in class with me. That light must be in their eyes 5, 10, 20 years from now. How one teaches hope remains a mystery to me, but if I can continue to show students of education, whether they are at the beginning, middle, or end of their journeys, that hope remains, then perhaps I too, will never lose the idealism that brought me to the classroom in the first place.