

FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH:

Several years ago, some students who planned to become teachers asked me about my personal philosophy of teaching history and how I tried to apply it. I suspect that it won't work for everyone, but this is mine.

My educational philosophy is based on a number of quotes, and my practical interpretation of their meaning.

"First, do thy patient no harm." - attributed to Hippocrates.

This is the beginning of the oath taken by medical doctors. Teachers would do well to remember it.

We can only teach a minute amount of material during any semester. If, in that limited time, we can instill a joy of learning rather than boredom or a hatred of the educational process, then we will have met our goals and our students will continue to learn on their own.

"Education is the sum total of all experiences, from birth to death." - John Dewey
A lot of folks don't like John Dewey, and I admit that I'm not too fond of some of his ideas. This, however, is the true essence of life, and education in all of its forms.

In practice, this comment connects with that of Hippocrates. We must teach not only the joy of learning but also the fact that learning continues throughout life, if we give it a chance. Some learn best by reading, some by listening, and some by seeing - - but all learn by experience. My goal is to provide as many different experiences as possible to students and open avenues of exploration for them to follow throughout life.

"We have met the enemy, and he is us." - Pogo Possum. (Walt Kelly)

Pogo Possum was the cartoon creation of a fellow named Walt Kelly. It was just as popular in the 1950s as any that are in use today. The quote is a "play" on the famous report from Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry after the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812, "We have met the enemy, and they are ours."

My experience is that many "teachers" are their own worst enemies and that some students learn 'in spite' of the teacher, rather than 'because' of the teacher. Because of this, I try to live by the following:

Anything that separates me from the student - separates me from the student. I teach more from in front of the desk than behind it. I walk around the classroom. I listen to problems of both an academic and personal nature and help with them if I can. I try to make them "my family" and involve them in my life. I would rather be thought of as eccentric, than as an elitist.

Any teaching that does not relate in some way to something within the frame of knowledge of the student is sterile. I talk about a lot of things in class that have nothing to do with Texas History or Cultural Anthropology but that can be related to them in a round-about way because they are a part of the students' experience. For instance, few students returning from Spring Break on the beach are unaware of the tar balls that stick to their feet and bathing suits. They blame the offshore oil wells. But, Louis de Moscoso used those same tar balls almost 500 years ago to caulk his boats and one of the leading exports of the Texas coast during the latter years of the 19th century was beach tar to cover the roofs of tenements in New York City.

The student is responsible for what is in the textbook. I am responsible for opening doors to what is NOT in the textbook.

Students are human too. Students never outgrow their need for recognition, understanding and compassion. I put gold stars and smiley faces on good papers and really big ones if the papers are exceptional. I attend their weddings and hold their hands when they need it. Sometimes I send birthday cards or cards of condolence. They eat picnics in my back yard. What difference does it really make if they take advantage of me sometimes? I would rather be considered naïve and approachable than to alienate even one student whose grandmother actually did die.

Teachers do not know all of the answers – nor should they. Never try to bluff your way through uncharted waters in the classroom. Students will know you are bluffing. There is absolutely nothing wrong with answering a student's question with, "I don't know, but we'll find out." Note, that it says "we'll", not "I'll". This is one more step in involving the student in the learning process that will, hopefully, continue through life.

Never argue with a student. No matter what the outcome, it isn't worth it. That doesn't mean that you must agree with the student. You must be willing to draw the line. Present your case, but simply remind the student that, although everyone is entitled to his or her personal perspective, it is your class.

That's about it. It's pretty simple.

One thing I can't help with, however, is teaching others how to get along with the bureaucratic element that faces all of us.

GOOD LUCK!!

Jeff Carroll

