

# Teaching Philosophy

Melissa Abramovitz

I teach what I know, which is both an extraordinary privilege and an opportunity, because I teach about conflict, conflict engagement, and issues of diversity, an area of study that I am deeply passionate about. I did not deliberately set out to become a teacher. To date, after having taught a few hundred students, I still feel a little embarrassed when I'm referred to as 'Professor'. There is so much yet to learn about this subject, that I invariably feel that I'm learning along with my students.

How would I define my teaching philosophy? It goes something like this: to teach well, I need to move with my students through the learning process and model the attitudes and behaviours that reflect the ideology and practice of conflict transformation as we complete the journey together. I encourage my students to reflect upon and challenge their personal assumptions and bias, which can make them feel uncomfortable. Often this feeling of discomfort can lead to an awakening concerning long-held patterns of behaviour and thinking, which can be a little bit scary. If my students have the courage to work their way through this with me, then I have to be willing to do the same with respect to my own personal assumptions and bias.

This means being flexible and responsive to the needs of the class and recognising that each group is different and unique. It means practicing a dialogic style of teaching that places principles and values at the centre of a class that is devoid of hierarchy. It means listening and communicating in a way that I hope they will adopt in their own professional and personal lives, while at the same time, not being 'preachy' about it. After all, I'm not perfect and the subjective nature of my subject matter can lend itself to different interpretations.

I believe that all students arrive in the classroom possessing skills, experience and wisdom drawn from their personal life lessons that enrich the classroom experience when shared. I don't believe in 'telling' when I teach. I prefer to ask questions and to encourage students to explore what the subject means to them. I create collaborative learning activities so that everybody has an opportunity to express themselves. By providing opportunity for individual reflection, paired, small group and whole class discussion, students can choose how they will participate. This is the most important aspect of teaching for me; ensuring that all students feel safe to express themselves. In my class, there is always space for humour, emotion and constructive controversy.

I have a lot of respect for my students and I'm not shy about telling them so. The majority of them are mature students who continue to work professionally in the Health and Community Social Service sector. It is important that the content of the course be relevant to their diverse professional practices. At the start of each course, I ask students to complete a Statement of Expectations for two purposes. One, is to help students think deliberately about their personal goals for the course. The other is for me to get a sense of who these particular learners are. Typically, I learn that many students expect to be able to apply new skills and knowledge in their work settings.

To sum up, I feel that it is both a privilege and an opportunity to teach conflict engagement and diversity to Continuing Education students. What I teach may be of interest for those looking to gain academic knowledge in this area, but far more importantly for me, it is also an expression of a way of being in the world. Mastering this subject area is a life-long journey, and so it is my privilege to introduce students to what may be for some, a new way of seeing and thinking. For me, it is also an opportunity because with each session that I teach, I learn something new about the material and equally importantly, I learn something new about myself.