

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

“I am not a teacher but an awakener.” Robert Frost

My teaching flows from my core values and beliefs that everything in life is relational and is about giving back. So, for me, these values and beliefs form the framework for my teaching. I aspire to create environments that allow students to realize that being the best that they can be will enrich their interface with the world around them. I also emphasize that our deep need for belonging can be achieved through partnership and community. I am privileged to be teaching in an academic environment that allows for deep discourse about personal humanity and social location at the micro level and social justice from the broader perspective. In this sense, my teaching targets personal growth and development in the context of the student’s ecology. A combination of therapeutic practice and advocacy with an eye to creativity and innovation are the tenets of my teaching approach.

In every teaching opportunity whether its in a classroom, a social service setting, a conference, a community site or one to one in my office, I try to offer experiential opportunities that nurture student curiosity, trust, mutual respect and passion. Generally due to the number of students, students work in pairs or small teams. Together they solve complex case or systemic situations through mutual problem solving, collaborative action and knowledge exchange.

I model the relational interactions that students will seek in their own child and youth care practice. Because my teaching revolves around issues of social justice, power and inequity, modeling necessarily demonstrates respect, non-judgment, anti-oppressive practice, the use of a trauma informed lens, the centering of youth in all that I do and the celebration of individuality and difference.

My teaching invests in tolerance for abstract knowledge and the natural ambiguity of the world. Students are encouraged to engage in critical reflection that takes shape from their own unique perspective and social location. I believe and reiterate to students that critical analysis is at the core of tertiary learning and that this analysis is both skeptical and empathic. Students learn to reflect and engage in the ideas and texts of others but through their own knowledge and life experience. They come to appreciate the role and vitality of hermeneutics in the shaping of their worldview and perspectives. Simultaneously they learn to empathically stand in the shoes of others while grappling with their narrative. The balance between skepticism and empathy in their critical reflection teaches what appears right to them.

The teaching environment takes on many shapes. The space is adapted as much as possible to the learning styles of the students. I employ a breadth and depth of learning strategies which are largely experiential in nature. Indeed, each and every class has an experiential component. This includes actual case studies, role-plays, practice scenarios, debates, field experience and trips, simulations by actors, service learning, guest lecturers, the use of social media, opportunities for distance education and community engagement. I attempt to foster an environment that is generative that allows students to

feel engaged and confident in order to challenge themselves and stretch the boundaries of their imagination, curiosity and creativity and that of their peers and teacher. Their teacher becomes anyone in the environment that offers insights, the gift of experience, or important contributions to the students learning as defined by the student. This process assists students in gaining comfort, flexibility and adeptness with the ambiguity and complexity of their professional practice. It also gives back to the student control over their own learning goals. Concrete skill development is also an important outcome of this philosophy and style of teaching.

Over the past decade as a Professor at Ryerson University, I have given 75 students the opportunity for a field trip to remote northern First Nations to engage with children and youth in their home, school and community environments. Students from child and youth care, nursing, social work, urban planning, journalism, midwifery, early childhood studies, psychology, criminal justice and creative arts (photography) attended these trips as part of an interdisciplinary team. They did not enter these First Nations as voyeurs or witness bearers. Their role necessarily evolved into enduring allies and partners with the youth, community members, Elders and leaders. Each student gained rich lived experience. As the team leader, I was able to guide and nurture this experience and wrap around them the support of the Indigenous people on this powerful journey. Most students reported that it had altered their career path and they have remained connected to community members with whom they had forged mutual relationships. The First Nations were initially ambivalent and suspicious of the presence of students but now they request their involvement with their youth because of the lasting relationships that have been forged.

As Director of the Graduate Program in CYC, I have had the opportunity to offer powerful internships to graduate students that are tied to my partnerships with Indigenous communities and my work with the Cross over Youth Project throughout the province. Each student has spontaneously identified a learning goal or teaching moment as a giving back to community. Students working with the Cross Over Youth team engage with community mental health service providers, residential care providers, child welfare authorities, judges, justices of the peace, police officers, probation officers, advocates, senior government officials and youth. Their presence in these professional environments has enhanced the profile of Ryerson University substantially. I serve as their teaching supervisor.

I believe that my role is to effectively demonstrate to students through relational practice the value of research, critical thinking, skill acquisition, theoretical frameworks and partnerships. My courses and teaching offer a balance between cross disciplinary practices and the enhancement of the core discipline in terms of knowledge and practice. My emphasis on experiential learning connects students to the world around them through local, national and international partnerships. I actively integrate my SRC activities and community service initiatives into my teaching across all courses.

Since the onset of my tenure as a faculty member, I have encouraged and invested in team teaching. This involves shared planning, course development, identification of

student assessment methods, ongoing analysis of the delivery of the instruction materials and the development of the objectives of the learning environment. This nurtures trust, a rich exchange of ideas and innovative course designs. The team approach allows for a greater depth and breadth to experiential learning opportunities.

My teaching is evaluated by students as challenging and rigorous but respectful, engaging, thought provoking with the ability to stretch the scope of their learning. At the end of each course and frequently throughout the course, I request from students through discussion and written evaluation, their impressions of the course content and delivery. I purposefully infuse this feedback in the development of the subsequent delivery of the course.

My teaching is part of my lifelong learning. It keeps me vibrant, engaged and passionate in order that I continue to nurture and inspire the vitality in my students.

Judy Finlay, December 2018