

My Teaching and Learning Philosophy

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The best teachers are those who show you where to look, but do not tell you what to see

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At the outset of my career as an educator the values and beliefs that I held related to teaching and learning were informed primarily by personal experiences as a learner and a novice teacher. I was socialized to believe that as a student I must be treated with respect, that curiosity must be nurtured and encouraged, and that teachers were accountable for providing an environment that was informed, safe, supportive, and enabling. Through memorable teaching and learning experiences, I have come to value kindness, personal meaning, justice, relationships, and a sense of fun as essential elements of effective teaching and learning.

As my experiences as an educator grew my core values expanded to embrace the complexity and importance of relationships, trust, humour, meaning, and engagement within the teacher- learner relationship. My choice of profession and my clinical practice interest were guided by similar values. Nursing is about relationships, trust, curiosity, engagement and discovering and respecting meaning in the lives and experiences of individuals, families, and communities. To be an effective pediatric mental health nurse required that I place relationships, trust, engagement, and respect as priorities in order to develop partnerships and a positive collaboration with children, families, and interdisciplinary teams – with the goal of fostering the development of healthy children. I see my role within the educational realm as mirroring what I strived to actualize in my nursing practice – to partner with students to create experiences that foster their ability to “take their place in the world” (Boyd, MacNeill & Sullivan, 2006, p. 1), and to orchestrate their personal and professional endeavours in meaningful and fulfilling ways. Boyd, and colleagues describe this approach to teaching and learning as relational pedagogy. It is guided by a social constructionist perspective in that students and teachers share ideas and work together to create the learning and teaching experience. The goal of the process and outcome of relational teaching is to provide a context in which students and teachers learn with one another. Values and beliefs espoused by Peplau (1952), Rogers (1967) and Friere (1972) align with relational pedagogy and have further informed my values and beliefs about teaching and learning. Peplau’s theory resonates with me on a number of levels. Her explicit recognition of the importance of relationships as the means by which to foster and engage in learning with patients and students fits with my personal and professional values. Peplau believed teacher-learner and nurse-patient relationships that are mutually influential are defined by an ongoing dynamic of give and take, trust and authenticity. I was exposed to the work of Carl Rogers during my graduate studies and, similar to Peplau, he spoke to the importance of relationships; that a teacher/learner relationship founded on trust creates an environment that is perceived by all to be participatory, dynamic and safe, and wherein there is “prizing” of the learner’s experience and confidence and trust in the capacity and potential of the learner (Rogers, 1967). Both Peplau and Rogers’ theoretical perspectives posit that it is through the teacher learner relationship that meaningful and mutual learning occurs. I have found that regardless of the “content” or foci of the ‘doing’, it is the relational dimension that brings meaning and satisfaction to my work. Paulo Freire’s (1972) perspective that the teaching/learning relationship should be characterized by equality and mutuality – where the student and teacher are both educators and educatees - has also been influential in my overall development and engagement in the realm of teaching and learning.

Educational humility is a tenet of relational teaching (Ramsden, 1987). I believe that establishing a foundation of knowledge provides a compass for ongoing learning and professional development that serves to continually advance one’s growth. I also believe that it is difficult to foster a student’s ability to find meaning in learning within a particular area if you have not engaged in discovering meaning yourself.

However, I do not consider expertise, experience and passion to be static attributes. Each experience I have with students and fellow faculty members offers me new learning, insights, and questions to ponder. More often than not, I reflect on these questions and ‘wonderings’ through the lenses of scholarship. My teaching scholarship is significantly influenced by my values and beliefs about teaching and learning and aligns with Boyer’s (1990) conception of the scholarship of teaching (SoTL) in that it includes engaging in original research, exploring connections, articulating the interdependence of theory and practice, and engaging students in knowledge development. I am highly active in SoTL with an emphasis on creative approaches aimed at enhancing student engagement, advancing curriculum development that is evidence informed and relevant within the context it is implemented and, innovative and responsive approaches to faculty mentorship. Outcomes of my student focused SoTL work have had impact at the local, national and international levels in that they have informed curriculum across undergraduate and graduate programs in the Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing, and were adopted as a strategic initiative by the Canadian Nursing Student Association. Publications arising from my SoTL work have been used in nursing and interprofessional education programs both nationally and internationally.

To act on my commitment to relational teaching and learning my teaching methods are facilitative in nature. I endeavour to create opportunities for students to work with one another, to share their insights with others, and learn from the insights and perspectives of their colleagues. At the beginning of each course I invite students to participate in a career visioning exercise wherein they reflect on who and what they wish to be in their chosen career. Using this vision as a foundation, they are asked to further reflect on their strengths and areas for development in relation to their vision. With their areas of development in mind, we discuss how, together, we can be intentional in shaping their engagement in the course to help them to grow in those areas in which they hope to further develop. We co-develop norms for our work together and reflect on how the course and our mutual engagement is going at regular intervals throughout term. For all assignments students are asked to select a subject or topic area that is of personal or professional relevance to them as a focus for their work. At the completion of each term I ask for volunteers to meet with me to discuss what worked well in the course and what they would recommend for changes/additions in the course curriculum and teaching/learning strategies for the following year. This feedback is of great value when I craft the syllabus and teaching learning experiences for the next cohort of students. Alumni of the course are also invited to participate in the course in future terms to share their experiences, learnings and insights with current students. Each and all of these methods are intended to create a safe space in which the teaching learning experience is co-constructed, relevant to all members and where creativity can thrive.

Although approaches to teaching, learning and education are in constant change – values continue to be the benchmark by which I, the students, and I believe the colleagues with whom I work, evaluate my effectiveness as an educator. Students have expressed an appreciation of honesty, commitment to their success, a sense of partnership in the learning process, humour, presence, and a belief in the importance of what is meaningful to them. Of equal value is what I learn from students and colleagues- to see things differently, to understand their worlds more fully, to challenge my perceptions or misperceptions and to grow. I share my teaching philosophy with all students at the beginning of the course and through both formative and summative evaluations I ask the students to comment on my ability to ‘live’ my philosophy in my role as course instructor. The quotes included below (extracted from qualitative course feedback over the last 5 years) suggest that my intent to be true to my values and beliefs is evident to students.

Has an ability to reshape learning in a way that makes students take ownership and interest in advancing their own knowledge far beyond the course expectations. She has a unique ability to engage students in the educational process. It was her level of engagement that made my undergraduate experience enjoyable.

Conveys a valuing of diversity and fosters an inclusive teaching environment that helps everyone to contribute. She prompted us to continue to question and wonder about things, recognize the importance of knowing my own values and, to guide my current teaching and learning, to live these values.

Brought an upbeat and fun attitude to the course, incorporated humour and was authentic and approachable. Her humour, communication and tone shows respect for the students and also calls for respect.

Appreciated sense of humour and humility – both diminished the faculty/student power imbalance and made the class more open, honest and relaxed. Presents self as a facilitator rather than an 'expert'.

Supportive teacher who communicates caring, I felt important in the class and that she was committed to my success.

Creates a learner-friendly, respectful, inclusive atmosphere and the continuous meaningful feedback exchange between the teacher and the class further directed the teaching-learning process.

My greatest learning was to share my thoughts and to realize that they carry value – to be true to myself.

In summary, I am grateful that, across my professional roles at Ryerson, I have had the opportunity to engage in rich and diverse teaching and learning experiences that have significantly shaped both my professional and personal growth. Ryerson's commitment to 'living' the full scope of SRC has allowed me to engage in scholarship that has shaped the way in which students across Canada - and beyond - engage in their academic and professional careers in personal and meaningful ways.

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