STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

David Schlanger

As a lifetime educator with 35 years of experience, I have been a privileged witness to enormous change at Ryerson. As an institution, Ryerson has matured into its own unique prominence ---- gaining university status and embarking on incredible expansion----- all to the credit of its visionary leadership. Student realities and challenges have changed economically and socially. Student attitudes towards effort and engagement have also changed, although not consistently in a positive direction. Notwithstanding all the external changes I have witnessed in the past three and a half decades, I find that my fundamental philosophy of teaching continues to revolve around three interrelated themes: passion, awareness, and the “value-added” factor.

Passion is what I have always tried to bring to the lectern for each and every class that I teach. I am intentionally animated and enthusiastic in my delivery. I strive to demonstrate passion for the subject material, for the process of learning, and for the personal development of each student to be the best that he or she can be. I try to model a passion for learning that goes beyond a cursory understanding of a topic or an issue. I want students to develop a love of learning. I also want to encourage them by example, so that whatever career they choose, they enter it knowing that passion is the key to professional success and personal fulfillment.

Maintaining an awareness of my students’ needs, realities, and characteristics has always been crucial to my teaching efficacy. My approach has always been ----intuitively and practically---- “student-centric.” I believe that it is my responsibility to understand the mindset of each cohort of students that I face. The first course that I ever taught at Ryerson was an introductory course in statistics that had a failure rate approaching 40%. Having an awareness of the fear that this quantitative course engendered, and quickly discovering the weak background that most of the students had in mathematics, I openly declared my number one personal objective for them: to make each and every one of them ‘quantitatively comfortable’ with the material. They didn’t have to love it or master it (although some did), but they all had to demonstrate effort, focus and improvement. After three years of teaching this course, I actually did receive an excellence award for teaching statistics. The failure rates, although still relatively high, had dropped somewhat; but students clearly appreciated the fact that I cared, understood their fears and anxieties, and that I sincerely tried to address their needs while not compromising the material or the standards.

I believe that having an awareness of my students’ realities has helped me reach them and teach them successfully over the years. It has, however, become increasingly difficult to do so.
Currently my students’ reality is the Internet—its instant sourcing of material, its facilitation of constant communication, and its easy accessibility in the classroom. Students have laptops that they bring to class ostensibly to take notes. Many of them surf during lectures. I have experienced this in my own classes and I have witnessed much of it during many teaching assessments of new faculty that I have done over the years. Over 90% of my business students own cellphones resulting in texting as a preoccupation, even during the best efforts put forth in a classroom lecture. Attention spans have waned. Work ethic and effort for grades have diminished. A collective sense of entitlement, on the other hand, of higher grades for less effort, has increased. How can one compete with the limitless variety, distractibility, and comprehensiveness of the world’s arguably greatest, most accessible new tool/toy? One might choose to try to ignore it, teach to whomever happens to be listening and maintain the position that students are responsible for the consequences of not engaging. I choose not to go that route. Instead, I take the awareness of the current reality as a challenge and take my own presentations to a higher level (especially in larger classes where eye-to-eye contact is that much more limited). I combine education with some entertainment or humour; I think of it as ‘edutainment’ with the emphasis on message impact. I choose to compete for student attention and engagement using greater energy and interest; key elements are often referenced with anecdotes, witticisms and unique visuals; and despite the overwhelming size of most classes, an environment that welcomes responsible personal participation emerges. My presentations are deliberately crafted to be sharper, more exciting, and memorable; they are designed with my students’ needs in mind and geared to having a lasting effect on their drive and intellect.

That is part one of the premise. Part two involves urging students to take responsibility for their own learning and strategies for success. I want students to understand the concept of adopting an internal locus of control. I unabashedly confront my students into taking ownership of their learning. I challenge them to identify their unproductive habits and to replace them with effective ones. Most of all, I preach the need to focus. My mantra for students is derived from the title of an article in the book, *Becoming a Master Student*, which is the required text for “BUS100: Strategies for Success,” the course that I currently teach. The mantra is: “Be here now.” Students need to learn ----more now than any other time in my teaching experience---- how to focus. I implore my students to own their focus. I encourage them to suppress their distractions, to conquer their fears, to overcome their adversities, to appreciate their position, and to take responsibility for their education. I stress self-awareness through self-discovery, and the character-building derived in setting goals and committing genuinely to carrying through. I try to set the table for learning, but remind them that it’s up to them to feast!

No matter what course or topic that I have taught, I have always asked myself this question: where’s the value-added? When I became Director of the Office of Student Achievement in July
2008, I was fortunate to inherit “BUS100: Strategies for Success,” a first semester compulsory course. I was given license to change the course, from one that primarily provided orientation, to one that challenged students to be the best they could be by emphasizing goal setting, time management, critical thinking, positivity, student self-discovery, self-reliance, engagement, and self-authorship. I have focused on inspiring students to take control of their academic career paths in a positive, proactive, and confident manner. I preach “positive attitude” as the competitive advantage required to increase the odds for their personal success in each and every arena.

A passionate approach keeps most of the students focused and interested in what I have to say. Having an awareness of the challenges and fears that they face shapes the delivery and nature of my presentations. But passion and awareness alone don’t cut it. The value-added factor is vital for successful teaching. Students must always see the relevance of what is being presented. They must appreciate the value of the reading material, the exercises, assignments and lectures. They must believe that their investment of time and effort has a purpose beyond the short-term objective of simply passing the course or getting a grade. It has to be about more than just the grade. I strive to impart that message to as many students as possible.

Besides demonstrating competency in the topic or subject at hand, which is obviously a prerequisite to teaching anything, my ability to encourage students to take hold of their education proactively and positively depends on the three themes that have been at the core of my teaching philosophy. I strive to consistently define and deliver what I believe to be value-added. I empathize with students and show them that I am aware of their needs, fears, apprehensions and concerns. With passion, I show them that I care about what they learn, how they learn, and who they are. The classroom requires lighting - literally and figuratively. As a career teacher who cares about quality, message, and inculcating a positive attitude towards both learning and life in the course of teaching, I intend to keep the lights lit in the eyes of the many wonderful students Ryerson shares with me.

David Schlanger

November 2014