

Open Hearts, Open Minds: Some Aspects of My Philosophy of Teaching

By Irini Valera-Rickerson, Architect and Professor of Art History

I was fortunate to be raised in a loving home with two college educated parents who believed in the importance of self-esteem and self-worth, exposure to new and differing ideas and a love of learning. As I grow older, I am able to see the influence my parents had on the evolution of my own philosophy of life and on my style of teaching.

Encourage in students a sense of self-esteem and self-worth

My top priority in teaching is the importance of self-esteem and self-worth as a basis for learning. I believe strongly in the creation of a positive, comfortable learning environment in which students feel safe to ask questions and to join the class in the process of learning. I always emphasize that the only stupid questions are the ones left unasked, and I frequently ask students for their own opinions during classes. Oftentimes, I use the Socratic method of teaching, and I have found that this technique produces a feeling of involvement, even in large lecture halls. I make an effort to treat every student with dignity and respect, and I go out of my way to encourage in any way I can those students who have had difficulties in the past.

Share teaching prejudices

When I was studying at UCI, I was fortunate to attend a lecture by Dr. Gunnar Myrdahl, a social scientist from Sweden, who had earned a Nobel Peace Prize for his work on race relations. He talked about the inevitable role of prejudice in teaching. He explained that the word prejudice actually had several meanings and the one he referred to with regard to teaching really meant pre-judgement. He went on to say that we all have our own pre-formed ideas about things, even if they are unconscious, and especially in regard to something that is important enough for us to be teaching. His concern was that, regardless of how painstakingly a teacher might be attempting to provide both sides of an issue, the teacher's own 'valuations' and prejudices would invariably shade the presentation of the information. The only ethical and scholarly remedy to this moral dilemma, he said, was to always inform our students ahead of time as to what our own opinions are, to tell them that we will attempt to be as fair and impartial as possible in our presentation of the material, but also to remind them that they should keep in mind our valuations and prejudices so that they can come to an opinion or decision based on our own critical thinking.

In my classes, I frequently remind my students of my own biases and encourage them to develop their own beliefs and to learn to be able to support these beliefs. I constantly ask my students for their opinions, and to support these opinions as a way to develop their critical thinking. Rote memorization of facts and dates will quickly evaporate once they finish a class, but hopefully students will take with them a new or improved ability to trust their own thinking and to support their ideas.

Be Available and Approachable to Students

An integral part of my philosophy is to be available and approachable to students so that they will feel free to ask questions or seek advice. This is also the part of being a teacher that I enjoy the most, so I encourage student contact. I emphasize in all my classes that I am available to them, not only during my regular office hours, but also whenever I am in the Gallery. This adds up to a lot of hours because during the average week, I spend at least twenty-five hours in the Gallery, either installing a new exhibition or curating it. I always feel very honored when my students feel comfortable and safe enough to seek me out for advice or support on personal matters. I attempt to be a good listener because I know that often it is enough for a student, or anyone else, just to express their feelings. On those occasions when they ask my opinion, I suggest that they generate a list of alternative responses to the situation, because I feel that this helps develop their self-reliance and critical thinking abilities. Other times, I have realized that a student needed professional help and I have direct them along the proper channel.

Be a Role Model as a Learner

As a teacher, I am aware of the potential influence I may have on others as a role model, especially impressionable young people. I emphasize to my students that learning is a lifelong process, and it is important to remain open to new ideas. I use myself as an example, because I explain that when I was a student, I was taught that Michelangelo had used dull colors in his paintings; however, with the advent of new technologies, it has recently been discovered that he painted with vibrant, brilliant colors.

Emphasize the Inter-relatedness of Knowledge

I emphasize to my students the ancient Greek belief that everything is inter-related. My goal is to help them better appreciate the cycles of history, the influences of the past upon the present, and the inter-relationships among different disciplines and people.

Use Technology to Enhance Creativity

Computers allow instructors to become very creative with their teaching. For the past year, I have used Powerpoint presentations, incorporating music, to create mini-movies of four to five minutes in length in 'AfterEffects' to introduce my students to the subject matter of the day. The minimovies help to arouse student interest in the subject being studied. Using bullets, I can introduce the main points of the lecture, reinforcing the important points and helping them organize the information and take good notes. This method of presenting information also helps students who learn visually, students who are non-native speakers of English, and students who may have deficiencies in basic reading and writing skills.

Create Opportunities for Involvement even in Large Lecture Classes

While I teach classes of 150 or so students in large lecture halls, I also believe in involving students. To accomplish this, I break the class up into smaller discussion groups for part of some classes. During this period, I ask the students to discuss a specific question and ask the groups to select one student to represent each to represent them in presenting their conclusions.

Be a Role Model in the Community

Being a good teacher is about more than just teaching. I have found that involving myself in external activities, such as the AIDS Committee, sponsoring an annual benefit raising money for AIDS charities and for scholarships for promising students in the memory of two local artists helps me show students the importance of community involvement. Last year, with the help of my colleagues, my students and my friends, we were able to provide clothes for the residents of an AIDS homeless shelter and cover the wish lists for the children of 52 families whose lives had been touched by AIDS. My experiences with the Service Learning Project on campus, directed by Professor Jay Yett, has also provided me and my students with wonderful community outreach opportunities. Once students have been involved in projects such as this, they often stay actively involved in their communities.

Stay Current in the Discipline and Related Fields

To be an outstanding teacher, one must also be current with activities and developments in one’s field as well as related fields, Last year, I was hired by the Bower’s Museum as a special consultant to the Trilogy of Glass exhibit. This year, I will be consulting with the Bowers in the development of the upcoming Etruscan exhibit, preparing educational materials for the museum’s docents and lecturing for both the docents and the public. It is exciting for me to be involved in these exhibits and to gain additional knowledge and insights that I can share with my students. I always tell my students that the more you learn, the more you realize how much there is out there to learn.

I wish to welcome the entire new faculty aboard the campus at Orange Coast College. You couldn’t be in a better place. Enjoy and please feel free to contact me at bobrini@aol.com if you need further help.

Mark two important dates to joining us: October 17th, for the opening of the exhibition, Spirit of Vietnam, Ancient Vietnamese Bronzes and Ceramics and November 30th, 8-9:30 p.m. at the Robert B. Moore Theater, for a benefit lecture, “Unique Art and Architecture From Around the World by Irini Valera-Rickerson, to raise money for AIDS charities and scholarships.

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