

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

When I think about a great school, I picture an institution deeply invested in practicing, celebrating, and defending progressive educational values. I think of a learning community that provides genuine opportunities for participation and leadership, both among the students, and the faculty at large. I think about the importance of inclusivity, and aligning the diverse constituencies of a school around a core set of values; critical thinking, creative engagement, and social responsibility to name a few. Finally, I think of a school that leverages the contributions of digital technology, not merely for the sake of purposeless innovation, but to help students take ownership over their learning, and connect to issues of social, political, and global consequence.

Successful schools must also exemplify a particular attitude towards learning. This attitude is one that embraces constructivist and democratic principles of education; constructivist in the sense that a school should invite students to create meaning from experience, and democratic because learning should empower students to ask questions, collaborate with each other, and respect diverse viewpoints. This particular attitude should permeate every aspect of school culture, so that an institution models the progressive educational values it deems important. Crucially, a faculty that engages in its own learning, will be more perceptive and responsive to how students experience their education. A faculty that challenges itself to provide the best education possible, will help create a culture where progress and improvement is the norm.

This is where assertive, intelligent, and dynamic leadership is so important. First and foremost, educational leadership should empower and inspire faculty to satisfy the highest standards of professional excellence. This goal can be achieved by developing an organizational framework which prioritizes mentorship, reflection and feedback. Leadership should also create a culture that critically examines curriculum, pedagogy, and the assessment of understanding, so that educational choices reflect best practices, while adapting to innovative research on teaching and learning. Finally, it is also imperative for leadership to engage in its own reflective practice, so that a school never loses site of its most important obligations and commitments.

Ultimately, any statement of educational philosophy, like any philosophy of leadership, must appreciate the value of listening to people, and the importance of developing relationships based on trust, mutual respect, and accountability. Most importantly, a philosophy of education and leadership must recognize the essential role schools play in facilitating the development of confident, conscientious, and independent learners. To that end, schools must provide the access, opportunities, and resources which allow students to develop their talents, and fulfill their creative potential. This goal inspires both my approach to leadership, and my sincere belief in the purpose and practice of progressive of education.

What are my student-centered learning targets? What prior knowledge are my students bringing to the learning experience? How will students learn in a problem-posing, real-life context? In what ways will students interact to create a cooperative, synergistic learning environment which values all players? How will I stimulate students' authentic, intrinsic motivation? How are the instructional activities promoting a democratic way of living? (Bean, 2005)

These guiding questions drive my instructional and procedural decisions which align with the theory of social constructivism. The following three pedagogical concepts, and associated descriptions and examples of each, clarify how learning happens for the teacher and students in my classes: a.) shared power in the democratic learning environment; b.) synergy of cooperative learning in problem-posing education; and c.) attention to Vygotsky's concept of students' zones of proximal development (Shabani, 2010) with formative assessment and reflection.

"In a democracy, the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that their say counts for something" (Beane, 2005). We are preparing students to be positive, contributory citizens, so it only makes sense that this would be modeled in education. For example: I first approach all teaching with humility while being very upfront about two things: one, I, the instructor, can learn from you and with you; and two, sometimes the most intelligent thing one can say is, "based on the information I have, I don't know at this time." Students are not vessels to be filled with the information I possess. This stance means that students are constantly posing questions, stating facts, sharing opinions, and creating ideas - the power is shared by the learning community members, myself included.

Through collaboration, multimedia creation, presentations, and questioning, students' unique sets of prior knowledge and experience influence and challenge each other's understanding to make new meaning of the world's challenges - large or small. For example, a small group of students may use guiding questions to discuss research from various sources surrounding a common problem or challenge. This group would then consider ways to open-mindedly share solutions with their classmates. "Each of our Children, those with special education labels and those without them, call for us to understand--not ignore, to have compassion--not pity, to create community--not isolate" (Hunt, 2001). I take each my students seriously and look at his or her whole human being: not just his or her identify as a student.

Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development is an important element of social constructivism as a learning theory. Students must reach outside themselves to the ideas and knowledge of others to make new meaning. How do we determine ZPD? We do it by knowing our students and using assessment to identify the very small gap between what each student can do and what he or she can *almost* do. Conversation, writing responses, discussions, questioning, quizzes, mind-mapping, and letter writing are telling of what meaning students could construct with a boost from others. It's also important to expose students to a wide range of resources and information from which to synthesize and respond to.

At the end of the day, my duty as an instructor is to support students in the journey of learning: the ultimate freedom (Kelley, 1962). Eleanor Roosevelt once stated, "Every effort must be made in childhood to teach the young to use their own minds." The art of teaching and learning *about* teaching and learning is complex. I constantly push myself to reflect and grow with careful attention to my own ZPD. Am I teaching concepts with activities which are in line with social constructivism? How can I acquire better attention to the detail necessary to understand individual students' needs? Which other learning activities will create authentic opportunities for learning and growth that my students can then use in their own classrooms? I'm honored to be in the business of the construction of knowledge and the associated freedom and dignity it brings.