

Philosophical Statement of Teaching Principles

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Introduction: Begin with the Students and Their Learning

As an educator in a major research-intensive university, I have observed thousands of students recruited, admitted and involved in our undergraduate programs as they proceed to their degrees and beyond. Many are radically transformed in the process, others appear to remain relatively unaffected. I have taught a fair number of these students and have learned much from my contact with them. But I feel that, as educators, collectively as well as individually, we could apply our creativity and intelligence to make a greater difference in the lives of these students. This is particularly true in the early stages of their university experience, when I believe students are simultaneously most receptive and most vulnerable. Whereas many advanced students have opportunities to collaborate and interact with faculty in individual or small-group situations, first-year students typically have far fewer such opportunities, just at the time when they are characteristically coping with serious personal and educational adjustment issues. The major challenge I have posed to myself has been how to have an important positive impact on the education of these beginning students, not just in my immediate contact with them in classes, but also institutionally in my role as an academic administrator.

The opportunity to develop this notion came with my appointment ten years ago as the chair of the Department of Psychology. As department chair, I could test out and act on various principles of influence and persuasion and implement measures that could make a difference in the educational experiences of large numbers of students. Although, these principles have often emerged from specific experiences, I now find they consistently apply in most contexts and at a variety of scales.

Principle 1: Create Models for Teaching and use them to Set an Example

As department chair, I immediately (1991) assumed full responsibility for teaching the large first-year introductory course (PSY100) and have continued to do so ever since. The course enrolment is annually around 1,800, and I teach all the students. The message I have conveyed is that this course - taught as it is by the department chair - is the pivotal undergraduate course in the department, and this message has been communicated at large to the students and their parents, to the university community at all levels, and, importantly, to faculty in my own department.

Principle 2: Organize and Structure Courses for the Benefit of the Students' Learning

From the overall perspective of the departmental curriculum, I saw the general goal of the introductory course as to integrate students into the university culture and specifically to introduce students to the department, thereby ensuring that the very best students would seek to continue in our programs. I experimented with a new integrative structure that involved the appointment of full-time, highly qualified, professional psychology tutors; the use of an administrative assistant; and the development of a sophisticated interactive web site for students and staff in the course. I like to think that it was my initiatives in this course and the positive response of the students that led to my receiving the Association of Part-time University Students/Students Administrative Council (APUS/SAC) Teaching Award in 1999.

Principle 3: Take Pedagogical Risks

Being chair also gave me the confidence to experiment with different large-lecture formats and the use of skits, demonstrations, and enactments, some with in-class student participation. Beyond this course, I worked with a specially-appointed Undergraduate Director to build new undergraduate programs that would challenge and appeal to students proceeding into the discipline. As department chair, I had the

advantage of being able to allocate departmental resources to support such experiments and developments.

Principle 4: Enhance Accessibility and Integration of Students into the University Culture by Focusing on the First-Year Experience

As PSY100 course instructor, I have regularly seen the need to address the issue of the first-year experience directly. First-year students are not simply lower-level versions of advanced students. They are an extremely diverse group – intellectually, culturally, and ethnically – and can benefit from an overt program by faculty and counselors to insure effective acculturation. To this end I have played a role in the following:

- First Year Instructors Guide. I participated in a work group to produce a guide for all instructors of first-year courses that addresses issues that are salient to first-year students. Given what I have learned from teaching PSY100, I had a large pool of information from which I could supply suggestions as to how instructors can facilitate the students' adjustment to the academic enterprise.
- Transitional Year Programme. Prior to being department chair, I was for ten years (1976- 86) Director of the university's Transitional Year Programme, a one-year full-time university access program for adult students otherwise not qualified for university entry for various reasons. In 1976, I was deeply saddened by the idea that such an important programme was to be closed and wanted to intervene. As Director I was thus able to re-establish the program after it had been out of operation for a year, hired new staff, created the curriculum, organized the recruitment procedures, and set in place the means for the transition of these students the following year into the first year of Arts and Science. Most importantly, I made sure each year to teach one of the four courses in the program, a course that I had specifically design for this particular group. My experience in directing the program in its early years had a decisive and profound effect on my understanding of the importance of diverse student backgrounds and their role in influencing a student's ability to adapt to the university culture. The experience has informed my teaching – and my teaching about teaching – ever since.

Principle 5: Actively Mentor a Climate of Teaching Excellence Within the Department

As department chair, I recognized that my impact on students could also be positively mediated through others, if I invested heavily in their professional development. These "others" include graduate students as well as faculty. Specifically I like to:

- teach the graduate course on teaching, normally taken by all senior Ph.D. students in the department who are intending to teach an advanced undergraduate course in their area in the summer-school session.
- provide an annual orientation session for all teaching assistants in the department, using a Guide for Teaching Assistants in Psychology that I have updated and produced each year.
- be seen by departmental faculty as a non-threatening source of informal collegial teaching "hints" whenever they find themselves in need of an ear about their classroom experiences
- emphasize that teaching is something that should be discussed with colleagues in the same way that one would solicit input on research strategies.
- make discussions of teaching part of the faculty hiring process in the department through inclusion of a private interview with the candidate in which we discuss their teaching philosophy and teaching portfolio, and subsequent report of this meeting to the search committee for consideration as part of their decision-making process.
- clearly convey the importance I place on teaching excellence through the development of criteria for assessment, and heavier weighting of teaching achievements, within the merit and promotion process of what is a very research-intensive department.

Principle 6: Contribute to Teaching Enhancement at the University by Supporting the Professional Development of Others

As someone who wants to enhance the student experience, I have seen it as my responsibility to exploit my position as Chair of a large department to disseminate skills and information on teaching, particularly large-class teaching, wherever it might be useful. In this regard I was honored to be awarded the University's Joan E. Foley Quality of Student Experience Award in 1998. The following are examples of activities that have been cited as helpful by colleagues:

- Providing annual workshops for new faculty in Arts and Science on the construction of a teaching portfolio.
- Participating in the annual orientation of new faculty in Arts and Science, focusing on the issues surrounding undergraduate education.
- Chairing an on-going working group of the Arts and Science Educational Advisory Committee that led to initiatives for enhancing the first-year student experience: an instructor's guide and methods to reveal students with academic difficulties for early and effective counseling intervention.
- Chairing the working group to establish a cross-campus graduate course on "teaching in higher education," (THE500) a course now in its fifth successful year. I have also participated annually in the teaching of this course, specifically on the topics of large class teaching and student evaluation.
- Establishing and continuing to coordinate, the University's Teaching Assistant Training Programme (TATP) that provides individual consultations for Teaching Assistants (TA's), gives workshops during the year on various topics in connection with TA work and offers a TA certificate program.
- Chairing the working group that devised the standard student evaluation for the Faculty of Arts and Science that is now used routinely by all courses in the Faculty and in other parts of the University.
- Establishing models of discipline-based and faculty-wide graduate courses for preparation of future faculty at U of T through a collaborative working group involving the TA union, the Graduate Student Union and the Graduate School.
- As advisor to the Provost on teaching development, advocating for the creation of a teaching development centre at the university by conducting an assessment of such centres in North America and preparing a preliminary background report currently being pursued by the Educational Advisory Committee.

Principle 7: Learn from Colleagues at Other Colleges and Universities

I am always delighted to be able to help others in their teaching endeavours, and to learn from them in return. In this regard, I have been pleased to consult respected colleagues across North America as they deal with many of the issues I have faced, particularly as many universities move to the large class format. The following have been some of the most rewarding collaborations, challenging me to extrapolate from my own experiences and orient them to the needs of others:

- Working with Memorial University and the University of Western Ontario to explore the challenges we all face in large class and or distance education programmes.
- Participating in the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education events, particularly symposia on large class teaching.
- Conducting workshops with colleagues from the AAHE and POD with regard to the professional development of university faculty and graduate students particularly the documentation of teaching excellence through teaching portfolios.