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Teaching Statement  

My educational philosophy is influenced by the old adage, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” If I may take this metaphor further, I believe that you can’t make the horse drink, but you must facilitate that drinking. You have to take off the saddlebags, unhitch his bit, and give him a chance. Just as you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink, you can lead a student to the classroom, but you can’t make him learn. However, as with the metaphorical horse, you have to facilitate the ability to quench that thirst be it for water or knowledge. I believe that the job of an educator is to facilitate learning for every student. I believe that there are three main ways in which, I, as an educator, can facilitate learning: use a variety of examples, maintain an engaging and dynamic classroom atmosphere, and incorporate multiple teaching styles.

As I plan my lessons, I believe it is important to teach through examples. Often, when teaching, we are presenting theoretical material that is hard to grasp without the use of a concrete example. I therefore often present concrete examples after presenting a big theoretical concept. I use a variety of techniques including drawing parallels between everyday experiences and the concepts being presented, providing, when appropriate, my own view on how to accomplish something (i.e., reading/writing articles, being a successful student) and encouraging students to come up with their own examples to teach themselves and each other. While we can go from the theoretical level down to the concrete example level, this is not a unidirectional relationship. I often will present a variety of concrete examples and then present the theory behind them. This is done to help facilitate the students’ ability to apply the concepts with which they are being presented to novel situations. Students have reported on their evaluation forms that my use of examples in this manner was an effective tool for their learning.

After an example has been presented, I encourage my students to apply this knowledge to novel situations because I believe the application of knowledge presented, as opposed to rote memorization, is fundamental to a good education. I believe that one of my first goals as an educator is not only to teach the material pertinent to the topic of the class, but to provide students with the tools necessary to understand information from a variety of sources. Teaching students how to abstract the implicit rules from a series of explicit examples is a life skill that will serve them into the future. I believe that a college education not only provides exposure to information that
will serve students in the future, but empowers students with the techniques and skills necessary for them to turn any experience into a learning experience.

Another way in which I believe I can facilitate learning is to present knowledge in an engaging and dynamic style. Bored students don’t pay attention. Even if the material you are presenting is of the utmost importance, if students are not taking it in, there’s no point. I use three techniques in order to keep the classroom an engaging and dynamic place.

I use humor, where appropriate, to keep students engaged and enthusiastic about learning. I find that students respond well to humor and often will retain information better if humor is included. This seems to result from the combination of keeping their interest such that they are paying attention to the material and providing memorable examples of the concepts being presented.

I am enthusiastic about the material being presented. I find that one of my greatest assets in successfully conveying information to the students is my enthusiasm about the subject matter. When a teacher is excited about a subject, the students take notice and the excitement is contagious. I find that my enthusiasm about a topic can make students pay more attention and work harder to understand, perhaps because they feel that the subject must be intrinsically interesting.

I also strive to achieve a dynamic atmosphere in the classroom. While the presentation of material often lends itself easily to PowerPoint slides, this is often not the most efficient way to connect with the students. While I do often use a slide presentation system, I try to vary the material presented and include a variety of presentation styles, such as discussions, question and answer periods, videos when appropriate, and thought exercises. I try to encourage students to ask questions and participate in discussions; this seems to be most effective when the atmosphere is light and engaging.

Finally, I believe that I can effectively facilitate learning by providing differentiated instruction to involve students with different learning styles to maximize the number of students who engage and understand the material. One of the most frustrating aspects of being a student is having a learning style that is vastly different from the teaching style being used. While I recognize that it is not feasible to teach each individual student with a different style, I believe in being flexible enough to try various methods of teaching. I also find that it is essential to be intuitive enough to understand when students are not grasping a concept as it is being presented, and adapt to a new perspective for presenting that material. I like to think of my style as evolving as well. I find that
teaching is a constant process of adaptation. Knowing that one of the best ways to convey an idea is to think of it from many different angles and that at the core, teaching is essentially telling others how you, as the educator, understand the concepts being presented.

Fundamental to my philosophy is the idea of building schema for my students to which new information can be pinned. I feel that by providing the scaffolding for learning using a combination of presenting examples, making theoretical concepts accessible, and providing multiple viewpoints on the topic presented, the information can be understood and the students can be provided with the skills needed to ask the questions that lead to the ultimate understanding of the topic. I believe that this task cannot be accomplished by spoon-feeding the information to the students. This strategy will not accomplish the type of long-term learning that I am interested in promoting, nor will this strategy arm them with the skills necessary for a lifetime of learning. I am interested in providing the students the entire spectrum of viewpoints on how to problem-solve on their own. I have found that my best teachers showed me the strategies to solve problems and process the information being presented, and these insights fueled my ability to understand the material. It is my goal as an educator to provide students with current data, the entire spectrum of viewpoints based on the data, and the skills needed to evaluate, synthesize, and analyze the data and the viewpoints.