Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Peter Collings  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Florida  

In my ten years of experience, each classroom that I have encountered is a problem -- how to best reach these students -- that I solve over the course of a semester. Every course is a unique combination of students, who come to the classroom with different backgrounds, motivations, and intellectual capacities, all of which present different challenges for my teaching. In this sense, the college classroom is very much like anthropological fieldwork. Just as the ethnographer arrives at the field site with considerable theoretical baggage and little idea what will happen next, so, too, is the classroom a combination the known and the unknown. This combination is what I find particularly enjoyable and compelling about teaching. Over the years I have found that the classroom provides me with an opportunity to use the themes of anthropology -- holism, relativism, and social justice -- as a means for transforming my students’ lives, facilitating their own growth as scholars and, most importantly, as people.

Much as an ethnographer collects data and conducts fieldwork, I see myself largely as a facilitator in the classroom. My role is to take responsibility for the learning environment, but to do so in a way that is, ideally, a partnership with the students in the classroom. Rather than lecture at passive listeners, I much prefer to engage them in a conversational style and manner, posing questions and problems that require solutions. Instead of feeding them material they must regurgitate on an exam, I prefer to set challenges that require students to use what they’ve learned to synthesize information and apply it to their own lives. This is true even in the large introductory classes that compose half of my teaching responsibilities at the University of Florida. In my large language and culture class, for example, I present students with data from multiple languages and ask them to work out the relationships between the languages, instead of simply telling them that languages x, y, and z are Indo-European because the experts say so. Discussing data, I find, uncovers numerous issues that are ripe for further discussion, among them academic lumping vs. splitting, the nature of linguistic evidence, standards of comparison in linguistics, and differences between how linguists see language and how language instructors see language. These kinds of topics are not easily engaged in a static lecture. My sense is that through this kind of problem-solving, students acquire ownership of the material and develop a stake in it. They also tap into my own goals for the course: rather than just learn about language and culture (for example), teasing out the problems in the classroom space helps my students learn how to learn.

Learning how to learn is among the most important of goals I have for my students. I realize that few of my students aspire to be anthropologists or to live a life in the academy. Fewer still will remember the specifics of bifurcate merging kinship systems. Ideally, the outcomes I strive for revolve around the transformational nature of learning. Anthropology’s themes of holism, relativism, and the power of culture in shaping and guiding behavior are directly applicable to their lives. These themes provide new perspectives for many of my students, who construct their knowledge of anthropology in reference to their own prior experience and their educational goals.
My role as facilitator, coupled with my belief that students learn best when they are actively constructing their knowledge, allows me to challenge students through different strategies. I often take a neutral stance on a topic or play Devil’s advocate, which encourages students to ask the questions that they may not be so keen to ask, let alone answer. As the facilitator, rather than the authority, I can ask the provocative questions about race and ethnicity, about ethnic slurs, about gender differences, and about capitalism and globalization. I feel very comfortable saying “I don’t know” to my students, and then offering that gap in our knowledge as a topic for future discussion: “Let’s find out”. The classroom space becomes a place where students tacitly understand that, regardless of my own positions on specific topics, the discussion is about exploration and learning, not just about the right answer for the test.

Together, these realities form the basis of my philosophy. Students learn based on a combination of the tools in their toolbox, their own motivation, and their own prior experience. Students carry this combination with them into the classroom, and it forms the lens through which they engage anthropology and the greater world. My specific methods and goals may change slightly depending on the course and the audience, but, overall, the themes of my teaching revolve around my role as a facilitator, my conception of the role of anthropology in the world, and my belief that the most important outcomes of student learning are transformational.

I may see myself as more of a guide in the learning process, but I am no pushover. I expect a great deal of my students. I find that they rise to the challenges posed by my reading list and my writing assignments. A comment on ratemyprofessors.com sums up my expectations, which I paraphrase here: “You really do have to read the books to do well. You really do have to come to class”. I treat my students as the adults that they are, and with the respect that they deserve, and I expect that they will meet my expectations. That said, there is an important distinction between assessing students based on their ability to perform, the tools in their toolbox, and their effort. Students who lack the tools (we have many at UF, for example, who arrive in my 4000-level classes without ever having written a significant paper, or an essay exam, at the college level), for example, require a different kind of attention than do the students who lack interest, or who lack ability.

In summary, my emphasis on the transformational nature of learning recognizes that students come into the classroom with different and diverse values and expectations, and that much of what they take away from the classroom depends on their own experience. Anthropology itself, with its emphasis on understanding the why and how of diversity of experience, instills in me a strong sense that part of my mission is to promote these kinds of understandings in my students. I teach because it is an opportunity to influence young minds, to promote learning how to learn, and to generate the ability to see problems from multiple angles and critically assess arguments. In short, I see teaching as an opportunity to change the world by influencing those who will shortly go out there themselves. It is an opportunity, as Gandhi directed, to be the change I wish to see in the world.