

Erica L. Wagner, Ph.D.
3rd DRAFT of Teaching Philosophy

*“In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future.
The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that doesn’t exist.”*

Eric Hoffer

As an academic researcher and university professor, I gain an in-depth understanding of the subjects I teach by conducting qualitative field research within organizations. In addition, I work to maintain a fresh and insightful understanding of the business context in which we find today’s Information Systems (IS). I believe that if we try we can make connections between everyday life and macro-level societal changes. Making links between the micro and macro is the way in which I most effectively learn. For example, I often begin class by bringing in exhibits from contemporary society (web sites, news articles, art) in order to make the link between academic topics that we are covering in the lecture and the daily lives of my students. Students' ability to internalize theoretical ideas through specific examples has proven to be a useful learning strategy. Not only are these pedagogical exercises challenging thought experiments, but they link global contexts to local experiences and help us learn by example. I believe that interaction between a whole (for example the classroom group) and its parts (individual students) creates an important feedback loop where meaning develops and deepens over time. From this perspective, my students’ interpretation of course content is deepened through reflexively creating shared meaning with each other in the classroom. While both my students and I enter the classroom at the beginning of each term with prejudices based on our pre-existing knowledge, it is through dialogue with each other that we adjust our interpretive lens and come to a finer reading of the situation. As such, I adopt a nurturing and motivating pedagogical style (as opposed to acting as a transmitter of content, or an ultimate expert who treats students as apprentices) in an effort to help students expand their view of the world. I aim to give students the skills to realize that learning is a process of linking their personal experiences (histories) to the subject matter at hand, and in so doing gain access to seemingly foreign ideas.

I believe it is my role and responsibility to create an environment where individualized learning takes place amongst students who enter my classroom with unique educational histories. Every student has his/her own perception of the world, and together our task is to create a learning environment that is both individually and collectively effective. Therefore, I see my job as managing student expectations and guiding their interpretations so that they come to a more nuanced and critical understanding of the course content. To accomplish this it is my responsibility to set clear expectations and determine reasonable learning goals. I provide encouragement and support but will not make excuses for poor student performance due to lack of effort. I wholeheartedly believe that students are motivated and productive when their fear of failure is supplanted by a desire to learn. I measure student progress in terms of both individual growth and absolute achievement. I believe that all students are capable of excelling and do not expect that success will look the same for each individual. I reward creativity and ‘out of the box’ thinking that is supported by evidence.

For example, part of the final grade in both my courses involves peer and self evaluation components. I believe that the former provides feedback that enables and encourages critical

thinking on behalf of students about how they might improve. Reflecting on the extent to which understanding of course content has been achieved frames the learning experience as one of process rather than perfection.

I think that students should be gaining certain skills at university that include being able to think critically, reason, and communicate analytically with a clear style. In order to accomplish this agenda my classes are designed to incorporate a high level of interaction between myself and the students. In many of my courses it is required that students do the same because this is one way of measuring the extent to which a student has moved beyond mere memorization of facts (rote learning) toward integrating new ideas into their lives. This implies that more is expected from student and teacher alike.

I follow a 'student-centered' approach to learning which implies that the student must take the initiative and responsibility for his or her own learning while I facilitate this process by creating diverse learning opportunities such as individual software projects requiring students to analyze data and make recommendations for business cases where one 'right answer' does not exist. I encourage students and also challenge them in a caring and trusting learning environment. Students are expected to set challenging goals and are recognized for their efforts as well as achievements. The aim of this approach is to create independent and hopefully lifelong learners.

I believe that we are all lifelong learners and as such I seek to develop my teaching skills throughout my career. Therefore, I view teacher training and instructional development as fundamental aspects of my job. It is important for teachers to be aware of what skills make effective educators. Since my arrival at Cornell I have been involved in curriculum redesign of our Information Systems courses, new course development, and professional development with David Way of the Center for Learning & Teaching at the University. I endeavor to hone my teaching skills and to share this learning process with my students and colleagues.

As an academic researcher who values her role as an educator, I commit myself to long term professional development of my teaching. I am committed to my own development as well as that of my students and colleagues and as such I have invested a great deal of time in creating a 'teaching portfolio' widely regarded by teaching and learning experts (including those at Cornell) to be the most effective way to emphasize the spectrum of activities that support teaching¹. Many of the most complex and time consuming components of being an educator are hidden from view - 'black-boxed' because they occur behind the scenes in preparation for the actual in-class experience. By choosing to document my development as a teacher over time, I have used the teaching portfolio as both the communication device for illustrating my efforts, and the vehicle through which I understand where I have been, where I am presently as a teacher, and where I hope to be in the future. The effort of completing a portfolio is itself a teacher - perhaps the best teacher, a teacher can have because it forces one to be explicit about their intentions, and the extent to which those intentions have been realized.

¹ Cornell University Teaching Evaluation Handbook, Third Edition, 1997 "Chapter II - The Teaching Portfolio: A Model for Documenting Teaching and Its Improvement" available from <http://www.clt.cornell.edu/resources/teh/ch2.html>