

Teaching Philosophy and Goals

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I subscribe to a critical humanist¹ philosophy in my teaching. My instructional activities generally begin with the recognition that humans operate as agents who are at least in some small way, conscious about their role in the production of reality. Critical humanists believe that such agency and consciousness are often mitigated by the material conditions of existence in a relatively unjust world held together by ideological superstructures like the mass media. Ultimately, my teaching seeks to develop and enhance the abilities of others to become more deeply aware of the messages that reproduce barriers to justice and human freedom. I see myself as a civic engineer who designs safe spaces that enable people to dialogue, to discover and tap into principles of communication to effect change. Through designing effective classroom activities, organizing course content in a way that encourages learning and thoughtful study, and improving my assessment techniques through pedagogical innovation and peer review, I believe that I have broadened my students' understandings of the possibilities for human existence.

With critical humanism as a central philosophy driving my instruction, my principal goal is to facilitate the development of the whole human being into a successful citizen, family member, leader, and worker. In teaching courses in the field of Communication Studies, this translates into reducing student anxieties about public speaking in order to improve their self-esteem and confidence, challenging students' intellectually, strategically emphasizing communication concepts and principles that connect students' experiences to coursework, and motivating students to continue the search for answers to questions about the human condition. In each course, I bring my critical humanist philosophy to bear through requiring students to consider and apply communication principles through case analyses, self-reflexive writing activities, practice tests, critical observations of messages in the public and private spheres, and whenever it is feasible, through service-learning projects.

Four core principles related to critical humanism have guided my teaching practice: perseverance, community, social ethics, and learning ownership. First, *perseverance* for me personally is an important characteristic to develop but many students seek merely the quickest way to make a touchdown in the game of academics and are unaware of how to manage significant setbacks in reaching their goals. Teaching communication is therefore an art and improving students' communication competencies requires overseeing their management of emotions at the same time as it requires the facilitation of their intellectual growth. I believe that any student who can demonstrate *grit*—a combination of determination and a thirst for reaching long-term goals is much more likely to have an

¹ Refers to a theory and set of pedagogical practices focused on the difficult task of understanding human cultural differences as expressions of an underlying human nature. Greta Hofman Nemiroff's *Reconstructing Education: Toward a Pedagogy of Critical Humanism* describes the approach as a combination of existential theory, feminist pedagogy, and values education that addresses holistic-psychological concerns of humanistic education within a sociopolitical context of critical pedagogy (<http://www.amazon.com/Reconstructing-Education-Pedagogy-Critical-Humanism/dp/0897892674>).

impact on society than the student with the highest IQ. Communication competence is achieved through trial, error and reflection. Over time and with practice, my students develop more effective communication skills to excel in their personal and professional lives.

Second, developing a sense of *community* in the classroom is of utmost importance to my students' moral and intellectual development. In my teaching, I cultivate unique learning communities in which students are able to share individual responses to course content, support one another in learning and provide ample examples from real-world experiences as they discover important communication principles. I consistently utilize Socratic questioning to guide students in reflecting together on what they know, how they feel, and how they have come to make sense of the world through academic study.

Third, I want students to learn develop *social ethics* by learning to value diverse perspectives and whenever possible have the opportunity to dialogue despite differences of opinion, cultural background and experience. True, honest dialogue strengthens relationships, de-escalates conflict and fosters understanding across social and cultural differences. These are key to fostering social ethics, which are generally the moral principles that represent the spirit of a people and the collective experience of a culture. For me, developing social ethics encourages both civic engagement and the development of intercultural knowledge and competence—"a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts."² Beyond simple contact and small talk, I help students to discover an ethic of care and to practice building relationships despite difference. Respecting and responding to others' needs regardless of race, ethnic background, learning ability, age, nationality, sexual orientation, education level, gender identity, etc., is important in all my courses. Setting this kind of behavior as standard, is a major goal of my instructional design and delivery. Discussions and public forums are therefore central to any course I design and whenever possible I require students to engage in cross-cultural conversations for credit.

Fourth, it is crucial that my students develop *learning ownership*, a sense of responsibility for their own learning process. I facilitate student learning with a central objective of building confidence but at the same time avoiding helplessness. I aim to help students in my classes discover that learning is not a passive process where instructors "pour information into their brains," but that they have to actively participate, seek out information that they want to know, and help make their own decisions about learning outcomes in order to determine what is most important for the lives they choose to live. I truly believe that learning is more likely to occur when students are engaged in active cognitive processes. In holding to these four core principles I am able to make my courses student-centered.

² Bennett, J. (2008). "Transformative training: Designing programs for culture learning." In *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations* (pp. 95-110). Ed., M. A. Moodian. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Finally, the goals of my assessment approaches are fairly simple: make instructions as clear as possible; include grading rubrics within all assignment instructions to reduce uncertainty and empower students; and always check the grading rubric against student performance to be fair in subjective judgments and to ensure that my instruction sufficiently prepared the students for the assessment. Overall, I encourage active learning through organizing a variety of course activities that keep students engaged.