

Teaching Philosophy

Meenal Rana

My teaching is influenced by many educators including bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Jose Bowen, and many mentors along the way. It continues to evolve with the students in classrooms and fields, who become essential in the pursuit of lifelong learning. I go into teaching with an intention that I will learn something new each day. And rarely do I experience disappointment. My role in the classrooms is of a facilitator, where I like to spark curiosity, which we practice as a coaction, and empower students to gain ownership of their learning.

Care and compassion are two foundational pillars of my work as an educator. I strive to create a community of learners, where students feel safe participating in class discussions, which also includes challenging oppressive ideas. An environment that is comfortable enough to engage in peer-to-peer exchange and to feel okay to be uncomfortable when their ideas are challenged. A classroom community where each member strives to be responsible and respectful toward others. The need for a safe learning environment becomes more crucial during the ongoing pandemic, especially when many individuals struggle with cumulative stress and general fatigue. Learning should spring hope during these difficult times. Positive interactions with my students are supported by the Neurosequential Model of Education (Perry, 2008)—creating a safe environment is important for engagement and relationship building. Learning that involves the brain's cortical region comes after safety and relationship building (regulated through the brain stem and limbic system of the brain, respectively). Dr. Bowen's work on how the human connection between teachers and students promotes learning in and outside of classrooms resonate with my philosophy of teaching.

Learning about my students and reminding myself that my students are human beings with lives outside the classroom that affect their engagement is imperative to me. I strive to memorize their names, learn the correct pronunciation, which makes them feel that they matter to me. Someone might say, "What is in the name?" I say, "A lot". This sense of belongingness leads to an increased motivation and a sense of accountability to work harder. Knowing my students helps me structure teaching goals in a way that each student can optimize their potential. Teaching should be relevant to students' goals and tailored to various learning styles/needs because students are likely to engage when they take ownership. I strive to facilitate the success of every student in my class, incorporating different types of activities and work to create an opportunity for them to share their unique set of strengths.

Diversity of perspectives in classroom adds value to teaching and learning goals. I invite students to share their experiences as I bring mine. Like bell hooks, I strongly believe that I should share some part of me, my vulnerabilities, my experiences before I expect them to open up to me with theirs. Personal stories are powerful way to connect at humane level and empower us by paying attention to different perspectives and vulnerabilities. Students bring real-life examples to class, discuss them in small groups and then share their discussion summaries with the class. My classes incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge from the areas of human genetics, human physiology, neuroscience, psychology, sociology, social work, and economics. Creating hands on opportunities by integrating research, teaching, and practice are central to my pedagogy.

Teaching Philosophy

Meenal Rana

I go with an open mindset, ready to feel vulnerable, with the idea that I may not know everything as a teacher, and a belief that I will learn something new if I don't know. And that it is okay to not know everything. I encourage a similar growth mindset in my classrooms. That it is okay to feel "inadequate" at times; that it is okay to fail because if we haven't failed, chances are that we haven't tried. We practice the habit of inviting constructive feedback. For example, to help students work on their writing I create opportunities to work with multiple drafts and provide feedback before submitting their final product. Students appreciate the multiple opportunities to improve their writing and learning without the pressure of grades.

Democratic classrooms lead to higher student input and, therefore, engagement. I incorporate students' feedback throughout the semester by checking with them periodically, "what is working well and what can we improve in order to maximize learning?" I especially pay attention to the students' voices that are in small numbers because democracy does not mean including only majority voices. By listening to students' views and working with feasible suggestions, I strive to establish an open environment in which students take responsibility for their learning (Greenspan, 2005).

Believing in each student that they have potential to navigate and succeed in their college education and beyond while holding high expectations are important to my teaching; in keeping with this, I challenge my students with both course materials and class activities. That said, without strong support that is tailored to the individual needs, high expectations may also lead to failure; therefore, I endeavor to scaffold the process. Being present in the moment with them and provide them my undivided attention indicating "I am talking to the most important person in this moment. And that's YOU. I am glad that you are here" help with trust building in scaffolding. Maximizing human interaction is the most important aspect of my teaching. These interactions include a reciprocal process in which both, the teacher and the learner, with exchangeable roles, engage in a mutually respectful and meaningful relationship, remain curious, learn from one another, and agree to disagree.