

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Today I received via campus mail my end-of-the-term teaching evaluations for fall semester (2006). I'm always a little nervous about opening them and with trepidation I grabbed the envelope containing the results from my introductory biology course (BIOL121). Although there is always room for improvement, there was no reason for me to worry – I was happy with the results. It was nice to read that the students appreciated my enthusiasm in class and my willingness to help them. However, buried among the otherwise positive accolades, one comment stood out. When asked to explain the rationale for my personal rating, one student described me as "eccentric." The student hadn't intended this comment to be a compliment, but I was thrilled. In my quarter-century of college teaching I have always tried to employ fun and original techniques that are pedagogically-sound. Until today, I would have described my teaching philosophy as innovative or creative; but I love the word "eccentric," and think that it fits even better.

So, what makes my teaching "eccentric?" I think the simple answer is I do many unique or "eccentric" things to motivate my students and help them enjoy the learning process. As an example, let's consider a typical day in one of my classes. I arrive about thirty minutes early pushing my teaching cart that is piled high with my notes, any class handouts and the rest of my teaching supplies including stickers, chalk, overhead makers, stapler, hole punch, and even a Chinese gong. I pop my "Botany Greatest Hits" CD into the boom box and crank up the volume on songs such as "Kindergarden Wall" by John McCutcheon and Guy Clark's "Home grown tomatoes." I often put a botanical cartoon on the overhead while organizing my materials for the day. At the exact moment the period is scheduled to begin, I turn off the music and one student who serves as the class leader rings the gong to announce that the class is in session. I then say to the students, "Good morning," and they respond in unison, "Good morning." I then ask, "How are you this morning?" and wait until the students reply with a pre-selected greeting on the overhead projector. We then begin class. I admit that this is rather "eccentric" but it has a definite purpose. The music helps the students clear their minds and begin to focus on our class tasks. The greeting forces the students to direct their full attention to our class proceedings and leave any personal issues or unfinished business until later. And I agree wholeheartedly with the person from whom I learned this technique (Dr. P. Pendse), that "the secret of joyful living is joyful greeting." Rituals, like this one, are important in the learning process because they help to welcome us, make us feel comfortable and mentally prepare us for the activities that follow.

After this somewhat eccentric beginning, I try to include in every class a mix of various techniques – lecture, discussion, questions, and group work. My goal is to provide students with a variety of ways to learn the course material so that they will find one technique that suits their learning style. Although I tend to focus on lecture or at least a somewhat Socratic-type interaction, among my favorite techniques are to use concept maps for summarizing ideas, case studies, in-class demonstrations where I play the role of a goofy scientist, and manipulatives that the students work with hands-on.

Perhaps my most eccentric technique is my "Gink & Go Dialogs." I have written a series of scripts involving two characters, Gink and Go, who are students in my introductory biology class. Go is the studious member of the pair while Gink is rather "eccentric." I pair up the students, give them a copy of the dialog, and then ask them to act out the role of one of the characters. Once they finish, I provide the students with questions to answer or we discuss the points embedded in the dialog. This technique takes just a few minutes and livens up a class presentation. You can view all of my dialogs on my web site. In addition to being fun, the reason I use this technique is to provide a model to encourage students to discuss the course material outside our classroom setting. Finally, as you might expect, another ritual signifies the end of our class; the leader rings the gong once again. The students wait to pack up their belongings until we've formally said "goodbye" and have paid respect to one another for sharing our learning experience.

My students receive a daily sticker as a reward for attending class. I also put goofy stickers and stamps on their exams and graded work and students receive stars (gold, silver, etc.) in recognition of their performance on exams. Some students in the past have commented that they find this rather "childish." They are correct. My goal is to recreate some of the fun and enthusiasm that children have for learning but that we seem to lose as we age. However, I always caution my students that even though I may be silly and "eccentric," I am always very serious about the goals of our course.

My exams are also somewhat "eccentric." I consider an exam to be an athletic event for the brain. Just like an athlete must warm-up before participating in a competition, I provide at the beginning of each exam a quote and some "light-hearted" directions. My purpose is to help relax the students a little bit before delving into the actual questions. At the end of the exam, I include a series of goofy questions as a way to "cool off." Again, this is done in good fun and I believe it ultimately helps to alleviate some of the stress associated with the testing situation.

On a more serious note, my courses are all mastery-based. I believe that a student should never have to wonder what to learn for an exam. I clearly specify learning goals and outcomes so any student can earn an "A" if he/she "masters" course materials. Since a student knows exactly what material to master, there is nothing standing between my students and an "A" - except themselves.

I also highly value teaching experiences outside of the classroom. Consequently, I try to arrange at least one field trip a semester for each of my classes. My favorite trip is my annual Christmas tree farm trip with my plant taxonomy (BIOL308) class. After a visit to a local farm where we learn about the species used for Christmas trees and how they are grown, we return to my home for a pancake or soup brunch. When possible, I invite other faculty and botanists on these trips. For example, this year a mycologist from Iowa State University joined me. During our lunch, we had a great conversation with the students about fungi, science and life in general.

One important goal of the excursions is to provide my students with some of the positive one-on-one interactions that I know were important to me as an undergraduate. As another example, I serve as one of the chief maple-syrup makers on campus. Because you need to cook sap as soon as it is collected, we often work throughout the evening. On many of these late nights, it is common for a half-dozen students or more to join us to learn about the process. It's an amazing experience to work side-by-side with a student in the sugar house at 1:00 AM with the moon shining

overhead and steam rising from the evaporator. These magical times are impossible to replicate in the classroom.

To close, I want to emphasize that despite some “eccentric” tendencies, I am still a traditional teacher at heart. I faithfully read the teaching literature and am a member of the major teaching organization for biologists (in fact, I may be the only one in the biology department who is a member of the National Association of Biology Teachers). I regularly attend teaching conferences (NABT convention), LES presentations, and in the past I was involved with teaching at the national level (Education committee of the Botanical Society of America). I maintain a detailed web site for my students complete with all of my notes and course materials. In short, teaching is my life; it’s not just a job.

Date: *January 21, 2007*

Edited: *January 4, 2008*