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Philosophy of Teaching: The Art of Caring

I first became interested in teaching when I was the Center Director of an after-school learning center in California.   The center focused on giving students an alternative approach to learning by working with computers in small instructional groups. The primary goal of my academic center was to create a positive and caring learning environment that enabled students to feel confident in their ability. We cared and attended to each of our students individually, and in hindsight I now know that this was an instrumental part of their success. As soon as I realized how critical a positive environment was for all kinds of learners, I became increasingly interested in how our public schools' atmosphere compared.   When I discovered that schools were not creating enough encouraging environments—through my volunteering in classrooms, this interest turned into a concern about our education system and contributed to a shift in my career goals to become a teacher.   My philosophy of education has been evolving since. I feel very strongly about creating a sense of community and care—more specifically what it means to be socially responsible, through my teaching practice to enable students to believe in themselves and in others. My three goals towards achieving a caring approach to teaching are: through modeling, building a curriculum that involves a socially responsible attitude, and developing a democratic classroom. I will address my philosophy of teaching by listing what I will do when I begin to teach, and ground these with arguments from the following articles: *The Art of Empathy: Teaching Students to Care* by Candace Jesse Stout and *Should We Teach Students to Resist* by Joyce Bellous. To conclude, I will discuss the challenges I anticipate in relating theory to practice.

The first of my three goals in taking a caring approach to teaching is modeling what it means to care. The most memorable and trusting teachers I have had in my life have been the ones who model what they teach. I observed that their pedagogic integrity (Bellous, p.133), for example, to do what they say they will do, made students respect them both as a person and as a teacher. My plans for modeling a caring approach and instilling this into my classroom environment involve: following through on what I tell my students, knowing and addressing my students by their name, taking the time to get to know my students (10 minute chats per student per term), planning for my students to get to know each other (relationship building exercises), and demonstrating what Stout calls fair-minded thinking, which is to "maintain constant vigilance over egocentricity, selfishness, greed, anger, fear, jealousy, etc." (Stout, p.87). I believe that if I maintain these steps in modeling, I will have established an environment where students feel comfortable to share themselves in the learning process and adopt some of the skills I am modeling.

The second goal I have for a caring approach to my teaching practice is integrating it into the Business Education curriculum. I will attempt to teach my students to care about what they are learning, to think critically about what they know, and how that affects them in learning more about the subject. During my 13 week practicum I organized a field trip to view *The Corporation* (documentary about the nature of business, its affects on this planet, and what we are doing about it). I decided to take 120 students to this movie to materialize the business concepts they had been learning, to reveal a critical eye towards how some businesses lack a socially responsible (in other words: caring) attitude towards our world, and to extend the learning process outside the classroom. It amazed me how much students absorbed from the movie, in particular considering its advanced topics. Furthermore, it confirmed for me the

importance of asking students what interests them in a subject area and what I can do about helping them fulfill their interests. Taking the time to care about what students know so far in their education and what they would like to learn, allows for the teacher-student relationship to ultimately shift into the direction where students feel empowered to share their true thoughts and feelings about the subject. (This was something I had not initially attempted during my 13 week practicum, but will put into practice when I get back into the classroom.)

My third and final goal for taking a caring approach to teaching is to create a democratic classroom. I want my students to feel empowered, to feel like they have a choice, to be heard, to hear others, to embrace what it means to affect change or not to. I want to give them the opportunity to know what their options are and for them to decide what path to take, rather than be limited in options and lack the ability to decide. I will attempt to create a democratic classroom by having the students suggest and vote on classroom procedures, creating a forum for initiating topics to be discussed, setting up the classroom as a learning community—this way everyone in the classroom has a voice and we learn from each other. By giving them a background and practice in a democratic process, I can be confident that my students' will have a voice or take a position once they graduate and are on their own. My belief in caring about my students' knowledge of a democratic society has a direct link to how I care about making a positive impact on the future of our society and the education system.

To summarize, my three goals towards achieving a caring approach to teaching are: modeling, curriculum, and a democratic classroom. I would like to discuss Stout's and Bellous' perspectives and how they relate to my goals. In the article, *The Art of Empathy: Teaching Students to Care*, I found myself feeling attached to the idea of how Stout describes the purpose of education, "the development of critical intelligence and the nurturing of the human capacity to

care." (Stout, p.85) I feel like our society lacks people who demonstrate both of these qualities.

Many people have a sense of what it means to think critically or what it means to care, but I do

not think that they have the confidence to demonstrate or communicate how to put these qualities

into practice. Therefore, my focus as a teacher will be to model caring for my students and to

establish a democratic classroom to allow students to learn how to function in a democratic

setting and build confidence in their voice. Stout and Bellous also address other concepts of the

learning process and its evolution. One aspect of Stout's opinion that I disagree with is her

assumption that teenage students can reach self-actualization in the learning process. "When

students understand the interdependence between self and other, when they develop the ability

and volition to reason empathetically within diverse points of view, they will begin to see the

truth in the assertion that knowledge comes only from community…." (Stout, p.88).   This

implies that students will only begin to see the truth of how to fully develop their knowledge

once they have understood and developed the abilities Stout describes. I would argue that

students are not capable of completely achieving full development "to reason empathetically"

due to their level of maturity, and that we need to be realistic about the differences in their

perspective and their lack of experience and practice of this skill. However, this does not mean

they are not capable of the beginning stages of this learning process, I think what is essential here

is what they can learn from the practice and having their surrounding environment set up for

being empathetic towards others. My attention to this as a classroom teacher will involve

proposing discussions that share and encourage "personal power" (Bellous, p.137), reflecting on

how students are treating each other (e.g. are they being democratic or are they being

totalitarian?), and using teaching strategies that address the students ability to care. Additionally,

I need to have awareness of where my students' empathy levels are and adjust my expectations constantly.

The second article that I chose for this essay, *Should We Teach Students to Resist?*, brings up a key concept that I find critical to success in learning: empowerment. Without a caring learning environment it is impossible to have your students feel empowered. I feel very strongly about the environments that we are creating for our students, because if they are not positive and caring then some students will feel uncomfortable, act disrespectfully, lack engagement in the subject or become passive. For example, I am enrolled in the LLED class in which the teacher has created an environment where students are sometimes afraid to speak, where he has done everything but be a fair-minded thinker, and now has a classroom full of students who look like zombies during his 180 minute monologues. In this case the lack empowerment has a direct and negative pedagogical impact, even on adult students who have the capability to self-actualize. Bellous' definition of having a voice individually and collectively confirmed my thoughts about democracy in the classroom. "If voice is related to empowerment, then the capacity to speak our identity clearly and to object to what is objectionable is not grounded in mere self-interest but our voice is related to the interests of others." (Bellous, p.137) As I mentioned earlier in my goal for establishing a democratic classroom, our students need to be given the setting to develop their voices so that they are confident to do so when they graduate. Otherwise our education system will continue to produce citizens who lack the maturity to pose "authentic questions" (Bellous, p.136)-which are questions that involve taking what you understand and developing what you need to know, and instead have citizens who lack a sense of feeling empowered and capable of creating a change.

To conclude, I will relate my teaching theories to practice in the classroom. One of the biggest challenges that I think I will face is creating a democratic classroom where everyone feels an equal amount of personal power and confidence in using their voices. The challenge will lie between addressing all the students who care to have a democratic classroom and all the students who do not. How will I get the students who do not care on board and those who do to stay interested? I plan on taking the time to understand my students through the ten minute chats per term and by allowing for some just not to care (I have to be realistic!) However, I do risk the chance of establishing an uncaring environment where if the class is lacking belief in the democratic process, people will steal each other's personal power rather than encouraging it. The other challenge that I anticipate for practice in the classroom is engaging those students who lack the maturity and foresight to understand what it means to care, or to think critically about themselves and others learning, or to allow themselves to see this as an opportunity to grow. Making connections for students, becoming transparent in my thinking, and showing humility will be three ways that I can help overcome this challenge.

In conclusion, my philosophy of education contains three goals for achieving the art of caring. They are to demonstrate strong modeling of what it means to care for people and the world, establish a sound curriculum that addresses the act of caring in a socially responsible manner, and finally to develop a democratic environment for students to practice their voice. The most important step to succeeding in maintaining my philosophy of teaching during my practice will be to reflect on my goals continuously.

Bibliography

Stout, C. (1999). The Art of Empathy: Teaching Students to Care. *The Journal of Art Education, 52* (2), 21-34.