

**R. August Hardy**

## **Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

### *Learning*

Learning is complex; it is collaborative, personal, challenging, universal. The list could continue. Learning is never passive. It doesn't just happen. You choose to learn. To explain my vision of learning, allow me to use an example: learning how to drive. Learning to drive is more than reading a manual; simply memorizing the function of the knobs, buttons and switches can't prepare one for the road. Driving requires adaptation and thinking which facts in a manual are unable to apply to themselves. Learning is also more than simply doing; driving a car doesn't mean one has learned how. The rules the surrounding drivers are following, the meaning of lights and signs will be ignored by this student. I believe that learning is a synthesis of both: an *active process* by which knowledge is applied and progresses from rote memorization to understanding. Learning requires reflection, effort, and most of all participation.

### *My Teaching Lessons*

While teaching one of my first courses, I realized the class was not learning. Concepts in the lecture were not connecting with students and the first quiz grades were abysmal. I was at a loss for what to do, so I turned to those most invested in my success: my students. I'd like to share with you the lessons I learned from those students, which I apply to every course I teach.

I identified and solved three problems. First, a post-lunch class meant quickly disengaged students. Their eyes would start glazing over minutes into the lecture; some began that way. Second, those that listened did not participate. Most questions I asked throughout lecture went unanswered. Third, students did not know what they didn't know. They wanted to understand economics and were unsure why they didn't. I take three steps in my classes to address these problems. First, I engage students' minds the moment they walk into class. Second, each class is an active, participatory event utilizing the Socratic method. Third, frequent feedback enables me to adjust lecture to students' needs and guides their learning. I will illustrate these methods by walking through an example class.

### *Teaching 'Opportunity Cost'*

My classroom experience is planned to draw students in as active participants. I arrive at the classroom early to write the day's learning goals on the board. "Today, you will learn the meaning of opportunity cost." Students now have a focal point throughout the time we are together; if confused they can look to it for guidance. Next, we open with a related question. "What did it cost you to come to class today?". I silently allow the students to write down answers, which we will discuss at the end of the class. These simple elements ensure that each class begins with every student mentally present.

I next query the class on their answers to the opening question, leaving large, sometimes uncomfortable, periods of silence. I will respond to most student answers with a simple "why?". Occasionally, I will poll the class: "who agrees with Kevin?" This use of the Socratic method serves many purposes. First, I can observe how each student approaches the material. Each class and each student learns differently. Second, silence in the classroom is not wasted time, but rather where most learning in my classes occurs. Students are processing the material, preparing for my responses, and practicing critical thinking. Finally, periodically polling the

## **R. August Hardy**

class updates me on how close they are to understanding the material. These discussions provide opportunities for students to learn from each other: “Alison, why do you disagree with Kevin?” “Kevin, has she changed your mind?” As class nears its conclusion, together we will look at the opening question, synthesizing an answer from my lecture, their critical thinking, and our discussion.

Before the next class, students will have homework, culminating in a weekly quiz. The questions I assign are a mixture of short answer and true/false/explain. “How would you define opportunity cost?” “What is the opportunity cost of your roommate living with you?” These questions reflect the kind of thinking encouraged in class. They set expectations for what the student should know and provide a tool to discuss where the student may fall short. Frequent graded homework also enables me to learn where the class is having difficulty, so I can alter future lectures to address any holes in understanding. Feedback is given directly to each student, which allows me to directly address his or her mistakes. My teaching method equips students to be active participants in the learning process.

### *Classroom Environment*

Respect for my students is paramount in my classroom. Discussing concepts which students don't understand or which may be controversial requires vulnerability. They trust me to encourage them in the process of learning and protect them from other students who may not share my values of respect. To this end, the first class covers the ground rules for discussion. We speak respectfully to each other. We critique ideas, not people. We do not interrupt. We use names. Though these rules seem simple, they demonstrate to students my commitment to discussion and my willingness to defend them. When students feel known, they feel comfortable. Comfort increases willingness to share in class and willingness to approach me with questions or difficulties.

George Mason has prepared me well for any teaching environment; it is a very diverse school in terms of traditional and non-traditional students, students in the military, young and old students, students with disabilities, and from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Economics has insights for all these students. My students' broad experiences and backgrounds have enhanced class, offering their classmates alternative views which I cannot.

### *Takeaway*

Teaching is very personal for me. I am deeply indebted to those teachers who taught me to learn. Love of the learning process is infectious. Students take note of my preparation, excitement, and inviting demeanor and respond in-kind. I cannot make a student desire learning; I can make learning attractive and lower the cost of participating. Creating an inquisitive atmosphere, engaging students' minds continually, and encouraging critical thinking lead to learning. My students choose to learn.