

A Letter to My Students

My approach to teaching may be radically different from anything you have experienced before. At least that is what I gather from conversations with former students. I'm writing this "letter" in order to clarify what I am trying to accomplish.

Most teaching we have experienced has been based on following the agenda of the teacher. Following such an agenda is not just a measure of what content has been covered, but is a measure of what the teacher "thinks" she or he has accomplished. Very little of this agenda has anything to do with what students *actually* have learned and understood.

However, this word "learning" is very tricky. Ordinarily, this term is used to describe how well students have done on a test, but tests don't necessarily measure anything that has to do with learning. From the perspective of my approach to this course, learning has several different dimensions:

1. *Learning* certainly has to do with the development of *conceptual understandings* of whatever subject matter one is studying. This learning has degrees of depth, extent, abstraction, and complexity. You may learn certain concepts, but that learning may be relatively superficial and confined to a very specific context or situation. On the other hand, this learning may involve great depth, may extend across multiple contexts, may involve relevant abstracted principles and models, and may be intricately interrelated with other understandings in ways that allow one to make sense of novel situations.
2. *Learning* has to do with one's sense of *identity* as a learner and participant in the community of teachers or scholars (of teaching). When we really learn about something, we are integrating that learning into who we are as a participant in whatever discipline we are studying to be a part. This integration into ourselves changes who we are, how we view ourselves, and how we act, talk, and think. This learning may occur without any explicit recognition that it is occurring.
3. *Learning* has to do with grasping new *meanings* in what we do and how we do it. In this case, these meanings have to do with being a teacher or scholar of teaching. Before we grasp these new meanings, we may go on a vacation and have a great time and learn about a new area or culture. After we have acquired this "new meaning" of being a teacher, we could take the same kind of vacation, have a great time, but what we learn is through the lens of a teacher. We not only learn about the new area or culture, but we see how this new learning can affect our teaching and relationships with students.
4. *Learning* has to do with developing *relationships* of all kinds: with students, with colleagues, with parents, with various subject matter concepts, and with all kinds of experiences and insights. Learning is seeing relationships.
5. *Learning* is about exploring our *assumptions* with the possibility of strengthening some assumptions and throwing out others. Such learning can be frustrating, frightening, and exhilarating (and possibly all at once). This is the kind of learning that is ***transformative***.

In order for these kinds of learning to take place within this course, everyone needs to fully engage in the following aspects:

1. Participating ***fully*** in each activity and discussion.
2. Reading and thinking about what you've read.
3. Working with children as an engaged "teacher."
4. Critically and analytically reflecting on how #1, #2, and #3 connect (what are the relationships?).

In addition, I have designed assignments and activities:

- to help overthrow assumptions with the possibility of transformative learning;

- to help you compose a new identity as a teacher;
- to learn in ways that are more complex with depth, extent, and abstraction;
- to help you develop new meaning as a teacher;
- to re-ignite and foster your creativity;
- to re-ignite and foster your real intelligence that schooling may have suppressed;
- to re-ignite and foster your curiosity.

This course may be frustrating, because our experiences with schooling may have “taught” us to be:

- passive learners;
- dependent learners (dependent on the teacher);
- linear learners;
- conformists;
- procrastinators;
- “successful” by going-through-the-motions (but not learn very much).

As a result, we find it difficult:

- to take initiative;
- to take responsibility for our own learning;
- to work on open-ended, ill-defined tasks (much like those we’ll encounter teaching);
- to be creative;
- to think deeply and critically;
- to take risks;
- to self-assess as the primary “bottom-line” (as opposed to playing the grade game);
- to appreciate learning as non-linear;
- to be an independent learner and worker;
- to be a knowledge producer as opposed to a knowledge consumer
- to be curious;
- to be open to new ideas;
- to be open to transformative learning;

So... I try to create a community in our classroom, where you can *play, try out new things, explore, take risks, fail, succeed, make mistakes, create, have fun, think hard, think deeply, be creative, laugh, think critically, become frustrated, scream*, and basically *become a revolutionary teacher*.

Jeff