

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I still consider myself to be a young educator, but that does not mean I have not found value in and place myself among those great educators that came before me. It is well known among my peers that I consider teaching and education an intrinsic part of my identity, and value it as high as, if not higher than, my research. My penchant for teaching has traversed many levels, from kindergarteners to college students, and my teaching philosophy can be examined from two opposed, albeit complementary vantage points. First, education and teaching typically does come down to instructional skills and methodologies. It is important to teach in a way that is conducive not only to student learning, growth, and enjoyment of the discipline, but also to the expansion of themselves as humans. This practice naturally ebbs and flows in different contexts, as no two humans are built the same, and this is especially true when teaching students. Second, not only am I incredibly sensitive to the state of education in this world and am motivated to create fair and equitable access of knowledge that helps address the disparities in education for underprivileged and underserved communities across the country, but it is also a mission of mine to prepare the next generation of humans to thrive in a world filled with ever-changing technologies that regularly impede proper dissemination of knowledge. Teaching is an iterative process, and I am proud to say I will never be done. Please enjoy the rest of this statement, as I explain my thought process toward many of the things that I deem should be most important for the whole of educators in our world.

The quintessential, perhaps stereotypical view of a teacher is the image of them standing in front of a room and giving a lecture. There is rightfully some truth to this, and educators have long had many jobs, but conveying knowledge and transmitting information is only a morsel. The etymology of the word *educator* may be described as guiding someone out of a place of ignorance. As an educator, I strive to not only ground my methods in good pedagogy but also help my students grow as the well-rounded humans they are meant to be. This may seem like a large and daunting term, but it begins with the everyday in-the-moment teaching skills and learning strategies that I do my best to impart upon my students. I believe it is crucial to treat all students with equity, honoring their inherent dignity, while recognizing that this is much more challenging a promise than simply stating it. Every student is different, has their own goals, strengths, and weaknesses, and I view it as one of my personal responsibilities to account for these distinctions. At the onset of every class, I lay stake my students a proverbial *blank slate* and paint their canvasses with their individual needs as time progresses. In practice, this simply means utilizing effective communication with my class and speaking to them as real humans with real lived experiences, rather than student monoliths. They arrive at my door having not only variable academic backgrounds, but also vastly different lived experiences, which I truly believe is beneficial by default. One thing that I have learned over the years is that nothing is intrinsically obvious; nothing should truly be considered baseline. All students learn in different ways, just as all students are inherently different, have different goals, different ambitions, and different capabilities. It is important to acknowledge my own personal biases in my teaching and not unfairly use myself as a metric to gauge student progress. The greatest moment for me as an educator is when I see the elusive “click” in their minds that was made possible by honoring their different starting points and tailoring my delivery in a way that was most beneficial to each one. An essential piece of this approach is delivery from multiple perspectives, to illuminate the subject matter in a way that resonates with every learner. Since no two students learn the same way, you never know what is going to make sense for one student versus another until you try.

Take for example the case of Common Core (CC) curriculum that has purportedly blasphemed the way that mathematics should be taught, so says many in mine and the previous generation. However, I stand with adept resolution that the problem was not the curriculum itself, but that it stemmed rather from instructional and motivational problems. William H. Schmidt, distinguished professor of education at Michigan State University, asserts quite unequivocally that CC had “a golden opportunity to do something about these inequalities” that arise because of the sheer population magnitude in this country. CC standards in mathematics focus on learning and understanding rather than rote memorization and offer real qualitative and quantitative reasoning for why mathematics exists in the context that it does. It uses methods that appear to be fundamentally nonsensical to our older, less-involved minds, but as a result, we have failed to consider the variegated students for whom this type of instruction was truly meant for. All students learn differently, and what makes no sense to one might be the exact thing that causes it to click for another student.

I view education holistically as a powerful opportunity to reconcile a deep-rooted inequality within our society. However, it is frequently neglected, and even weaponized within the United States, where disparities in educational opportunities remain pernicious, harrowing. Too many children are pigeonholed into unfair and restrictive paths by their ZIP code or by the color of their skin, perpetuating a cascade of social injustice. This flawed structure resonates through generations, from under-invested schools to disparate discipline practices, until its effects seep into every corner of our society. As a person who is well-versed on educational policy and standards in the United States, I was always aware that opportunity was tightly connected to locale and demographic, but I was painfully blind to the extent to which these heavy disparities remain, well into the 21st century. I don't consider it exaggeration to say that a white child in even the most dilapidated of neighborhoods still has far greater chances of allowing education to thrust them forward than the average Black child in the suburbs. The overrepresentation of Black individuals sequestered in the prison-industrial complex is also not a coincidence; it is a symptom of systemic educational inequality, so much so that one would be hard pressed to even consider it a natural symptom, and not a manufactured one functioning exactly as intended. And then ignorance allows people the audacity to question *why* things currently are the way they are, and *why* things exist this way. For us as a society to ameliorate this massive wound, a nationwide improvement and reconciliation of education for all is nothing short of paramount.

Being an educator for college students now, a vast majority (if not all) are well past that proverbial "critical point," where their life is actively being shaped by the education that they receive. This is nothing short of heartbreaking, knowing that there are children out there who have the possibility to change the world, but will never be afforded that chance. There is not much that I can do alone, but I see my role as an educator as a small but powerful opportunity to contribute toward that reconciliation one step at a time. While my current generation of students have triumphed where others have been hamstrung, they still face ever-growing challenges to what *getting an education even means*, as technologies advance to unprecedented heights.

Prior to starting my PhD, I worked for a tech company that specialized in training artificial intelligence chatbots. I have experienced first-hand the rapid rate at which these technologies are evolving, not just in my previous employment, but also through my work with students in an education setting. Artificial intelligence is simultaneously (1) the greatest technological advancement that our world has ever seen and (2) one of the worst atrocities to stymie legitimate intellectual development and creativity. I have seen directly the disastrous effects that large language models like ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot have caused on the state of education. Rather than being used as a tool to further understanding and fill in gaps of knowledge, these models are too often used as a substitute for effort and engagement, resulting in students bypassing the learning process altogether. I tell my students on the very first day of every class that we are in uncharted waters (in many more ways than one), and that learning how to use technology like AI to our advantage is a pivotal task that is unique to the current generation; no past lives have had to tango with technology the way that we do now. Attempting to ban AI in the classroom would not only be impractical, but entirely misguided, as students will inevitably find ways to use the technology surreptitiously. It would also create another degree of intellectual damping that only hinders our students progress in the long run. Therefore, I try to instill in my students clear expectations for how to use AI from the get-go. I encourage them to use AI to their advantage when they need a perspective shift or additional clarification after hours, rather than as a replacement of their own thinking. I acknowledge that AI is not going anywhere any time soon, and as educators, we must understand that one of the most important things we can teach our students is to not forsake and outsource their own learning and their own education to the inanimate.

Finally, teaching should not be a unilateral process. It is shortsighted to suggest that the flow of knowledge, experience, and information is purely one-sided from teacher to student. I expect (hope, even) that I learn many things from my students as my career progresses. I believe it is a sign of a great educator when you can acknowledge that you have learned something from a pupil, and as I alluded to earlier, I wholeheartedly consider teaching an iterative process that never truly concludes. As I solidify my place in academia, I hope that I get the opportunity to act on many of my principles laid forth here, and that this teaching philosophy develops just as I do, into a mantra that the greats who inspired me to teach would be proud of.