

Educators transform students' lives. While growing in knowledge and skill equips people to succeed, true education goes beyond that. In an age where AI can deliver facts in seconds, the true distinction of an educator lies in cultivating understanding, curiosity, and the human drive to learn. As William Butler Yeats wrote, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." My role as an educator is to illuminate what is possible, sparking ambition through example and opportunity. Just as a friend checks in and offers support, educators must care for the whole student—academically, socially, emotionally, and at times even spiritually. By building this foundation of trust and encouragement, students are empowered not only to grow in knowledge, but to thrive in confidence and resilience as they pursue their academic journeys.

### Catalyzing Learning through Curiosity and Inspiration

Curiosity is the foundation of lasting learning, and my teaching begins by showing students that the boundaries they perceive are often far narrower than what they can achieve. James Lang, in *Small Teaching*, writes that students “need inspiration as much as, if not more than, they need knowledge or skill.” I have witnessed this firsthand through outreach efforts that extend classroom teaching into moments of discovery.

At one Chicago Public Schools outreach event, I demonstrated a robot navigating and scanning a field autonomously in real time. Corn stalk counts, robot speed, and other metrics were displayed on a tablet interface. The group lit up—students crowded around for a better view, questions spilled out, and their teacher asked for more resources to help continue the conversation. That day, the students did not just learn information—they saw technology in action and imagined themselves as future innovators.

Through In League with STEM, I have worked with over 380 local Black middle and high school students from schools across Champaign-Urbana. Each week, I worked directly with students at Centennial High School, Jefferson Middle School, Franklin STEAM Academy, Edison Middle School, and Central High School during their lunch hours. My focus was developing and leading hands-on robotics curriculum—like coding a robot to drive in different shapes taped on the floor around the classroom. I also leveraged my professional network to invite a Black professor from my alma mater to speak, helping students connect with diverse role models in STEM. Over the fall semester, our team engaged nearly 400 students, and the Champaign County Community Coalition invited us to their community meeting to recognize and celebrate our early impact.

One of my favorite moments came when a student—quiet and reserved at the start—lit up his robot successfully followed the star, the most difficult shape. He rarely showed interest in his classes, but that day he jumped up excitedly and proudly demonstrated his robot to his peers. Watching him shift from disinterest to excitement was a powerful reminder

of how hands-on, extracurricular experiences can spark curiosity and confidence in ways that traditional classrooms sometimes cannot. In the future, I will continue designing demonstrations and activities that spark wonder and help students see themselves as creators of knowledge, not just consumers.

### Structuring Academic Success through Clarity and Support

Inspiration must be paired with structure for students to succeed academically. As Instructor of Record for CS 225: Data Structures (asynchronous online), I designed a 12-week course with lectures five days a week—four focused on content and one on labs. Recognizing the limits of attention spans, I recorded videos in short, focused segments organized by clear learning objectives, which students later praised in course surveys. Each lecture explicitly connected objectives to Bloom’s Taxonomy, clarifying the depth of understanding expected.

Beyond content delivery, I managed a team of nine course assistants, running weekly meetings to coordinate exam and assignment development, autograder debugging, plagiarism report reviews, and improvements to office hours. By providing clear expectations and logistical support for staff, I ensured that students received timely feedback and consistent communication. I also worked with course staff to run live review sessions where students could practice problems matching exam complexity. These practices created an environment where students dispersed throughout the world had both clarity of expectations and the support needed to meet them.

### Fostering Social Learning and Academic Community

Students learn more deeply in social settings. In CS 225, I encouraged collaboration by offering extra credit for reflective lab reports that described who students worked with and what they learned from their partner. I also created an online forum to help students find partners across time zones, which proved invaluable in the fully online setting. One student reflected, “Working with [my teammate] was really helpful during this lab. I’m particularly bad at memory [management], but after talking with her I feel like I understand stacks and heaps way more.” Designing opportunities for collaboration transforms isolation into community, strengthening both understanding and resilience. For in person courses, I would similarly incorporate assignments that require teamwork and encourage social learning.

This philosophy has been especially important in my role as instructor for an introductory programming course at Danville Correctional Facility. My 17 students range in age from their early 30s to late 50s, with widely varied backgrounds in computer literacy. The prison setting brings unique challenges—material approval can be spontaneous, technology access is limited, and abilities differ dramatically. To address this, I structured assignments to allow flexible pacing while ensuring advanced students had sufficient challenge. I also encouraged peer learning, where students supported one another’s progress. These

strategies fostered mutual support and growth, showing me how community can empower learners even in restrictive settings. Since many classrooms begin with similar diversity in abilities and backgrounds, I will apply these practices in future teaching by building structures of collaboration and belonging that help students learn from and rely on each other throughout the semester.

### Building Emotional Resilience through Care and Encouragement

Effective teaching also requires attending to students' emotional resilience, enabling them to persevere through challenges. In CS 225, one student unintentionally committed an academic integrity violation while coping with a family loss. I first expressed condolences and shared bereavement resources before addressing the violation, making clear that continued effort could still lead to success. The student ultimately earned an A, crediting renewed motivation from this encouragement. Another student, frustrated after discovering a mistake right after an exam, emailed me ready to give up. I empathized, offered test-taking strategies, and reminded him of what he could control moving forward. He later earned an A-, telling me that the conversation helped him manage stress and stay focused. These experiences affirmed my commitment to supporting students not only academically, but emotionally, so they can persist with confidence. I will continue to approach teaching with empathy, helping future students navigate challenges with confidence and resilience that will serve them well beyond the classroom.

### Continuing to Grow as an Educator

I view teaching as continual learning. My outreach experiences—ranging from leading interactive computational linguistics tutorials for high schoolers to coordinating robotics lab tours for hundreds of visitors—have broadened my ability to adapt material to diverse audiences. I have learned that inspiring curiosity in a 12-year-old with a hands-on activity is not so different from motivating a college student with a real-world application: both require sparking wonder and making learning feel personal.

Teaching is more than the transfer of knowledge—it is the art of inspiring possibility and guiding students toward their fullest potential. From leading online courses to teaching in correctional facilities, from mentoring future TAs to designing outreach events for underrepresented communities, I have sought to create environments that cultivate curiosity, community, and resilience. Just as that robotics demonstration years ago lit a spark in a group of high schoolers, I aim to design learning experiences that challenge, support, and inspire. I am committed to refining my teaching continually so that every student I encounter leaves not just with knowledge, but with the confidence to use it.