

1.0 Philosophy of Educational Leadership

In January 2016, I was thrilled to receive one of ten inaugural University of Calgary Teaching Scholars awards. The three-year funding that came with this recognition has allowed me to develop and implement a new graduate student teaching development program called SAGES (SoTL Advancing Graduate Education in STEM). This program represents the culmination of an educational leadership practice I have been developing since I began my teaching career in 2006. SAGES also highlights the central theme in my philosophy as an educator and as a leader: I am passionate about facilitating the growth and empowerment of students and faculty so that they can further develop their own teaching and leadership skills.

As a MSc student 19 years ago, I found myself thrust into the role of a teaching assistant (TA) with little preparation and no mentorship. Memories of these experiences came back to me when I joined the University of Calgary and became a lab coordinator overseeing 15 graduate student TAs. I wanted to provide them with a better experience than the one I had. This motivation, coupled with my introduction to SoTL practices in programs and workshops I participated in, helped me develop an organic and holistic philosophy of educational leadership that I describe below.

Great leaders are effective facilitators who empower their peers. As educational leaders, teachers must create nurturing environments to support the success of individuals and the group as a whole. This central belief has guided how I approach my work as the laboratory coordinator of graduate student TAs for large-enrolment biology courses. Empowering TAs to be ‘partners in teaching,’ I provide them with opportunities to contribute to the design of laboratory activities. I have observed first-hand how this empowerment has resulted in considerable improvements to the undergraduate learning experience while TAs gain confidence in their own judgment and abilities.

Great leaders are inclusive and empathetic. Effective leaders develop a common vision through facilitated discussions with all team members. I always strive to have open and respectful discussions that allow the diverse ideas and opinions of each individual to be heard. Understanding group dynamics and individual personalities are also essential to positive outcomes. This principle serves me well when facilitating educational development workshops for members of the university community who hold diverse views on teaching and learning.

Effective leaders empower others to facilitate change. Strong leaders share their resources and experiences with success or failure, encouraging others to take risks and facilitate change within their own contexts. When I decided to introduce alternative approaches to traditional content delivery into my large biochemistry classes, I didn’t know where to start. However, I sought out resources on flipped learning, which allowed me to devise and implement the activities into my course. Since then I have worked to empower others to make similar changes in their classes through a workshop program created in collaboration with the University of Calgary’s Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. In these workshops, the many hard-won lessons from both my failures and successes seem to resonate strongly with my peers as they can see how my experiences relate to the challenges they face in their own teaching practices.

I believe the best leaders are committed to growing their leadership practice by seeking mentors and feedback from their peers. Learning is a lifelong process, and I strongly believe that my views and abilities as a leader need to constantly evolve in step with my growing experience and education. I actively seek the advice of mentors and participate in leadership and facilitation workshops. I have also engaged with peers in initiatives like Facilitation Squares to obtain valuable feedback on my facilitation and leadership skills.

