

Teaching Philosophy

“The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery”

- *Mark Van Doren*

This quote was etched on the inside of a large coffee mug, hand painted by a couple of former students (BHSc '14) and presented to me at the time of their graduation. On the outside of the mug, in large block writing, is the label “Academic Therapist”. I never would have anticipated that who I strive to be as an educator could be so articulately expressed by students, and yet it completely captures my commitment to supporting students through their discovery of the disciplinary knowledge in health sciences and discovery of who they are as students. As the Director for the Health & Society program, Bachelor of Health Sciences (honours) (BHSc) and instructor for a number of health and society, and medical sciences courses, I strive to achieve this by providing authentic learning experiences relevant to the practice of public health and health research, empowering students as active participants in their education, a dedication to mentorship, and a commitment to educational scholarship and leadership.

Nurturing critical thinking skills through authentic learning experiences

The goal of the BHSc program is to foster students’ competencies to become the health researchers and health professionals of the future; therefore graduates must be creative, critical thinkers who are dedicated to life-long learning through inquiry. Critical thinking is also an important transferable skill essential for success in a broad range of careers outside the field of health. Most importantly to me, critical thinking is a vital life skill and is essential for developing an informed and socially responsible citizenry. Many of the strategies that I use in my teaching reflect signature pedagogy of the health sciences, including engagement with published research articles and inquiry-based assignments. Inherent in this pedagogical approach is the development of critical thinking skills. I feel strongly that students should engage in learning experiences that are authentic to professional activities in the health sciences, such as the HSOC 201 Journal Club assignment and an outbreak investigation simulation in MDSC 415 (outlined in the Teaching Strategies section) so that students are well-prepared for careers in this area. Additionally, critical thinking is central to these activities and so critical thinking skills are core learning outcomes in all of the courses that I teach. Using authentic learning opportunities motivates students to pursue their interests in public health and the health sciences and promotes deep and lasting learning. In her support letter, former student Anika Winn notes that my teaching approaches helped her to gain foundational knowledge and skills that she applied in her research work and even currently in Law school at the University of Ottawa.

Students as drivers of their own learning

Guiding students through a journey of discovery requires that students’ needs, expectations and aspirations be at the forefront of all that I do. In my classrooms, students are the drivers of their educational experience; I seek to empower students through a student-centered approach. As described in the student letters of support, this is a powerful way of motivating learning and engagement.

I incorporate active, inductive, and collaborative learning into my teaching practice, engaging students in learning in a variety of ways. My active learning strategies include solving problem activities, case studies and readings that inspire student-generated questions. Many of the active learning activities that I use involve small-group work, where students practice articulating concepts and sharing ideas, develop collaboration skills and learn from the various perspectives of their peers. Listening to the small-group discussions in class provides an opportunity for me to monitor comprehension, to provide

formative feedback and to interact more closely with students. As I circulate around the room to monitor group activities and facilitate as groups share with the class the key points of their discussions, I am no longer surprised that I, too, learn through these interactions; about different perspectives and about the students themselves. This is an aspect of teaching that I enjoy and find particularly rewarding.

The opportunity to receive and to provide constructive feedback is also important to empowering students. Clearly articulated feedback provides students with opportunities to enhance their learning. Assessments are scaffolded in my course designs so that students have the opportunity to use feedback to improve as the term progresses. I also make myself available to students to discuss feedback, thus ensuring that students feel supported in their learning journey. Similarly, I value receiving feedback *from* students. Soliciting feedback during and at the end of term provides important points of reflection for me while empowering students to shape their learning environment. It is important to me that students see that their feedback is not only valued but also leads to change, and so I often make adjustments to my teaching practice during the semesters in response to feedback, and am explicit about the changes I make to a course and my teaching in response to course evaluations.

Lastly, students cannot feel empowered as learners if they are not in a supportive learning environment. I aim to create a classroom that fosters respect and where open communication is the norm. Each academic term begins by soliciting students' expectations of their peers and of me for creating a positive learning environment. I also model this by being accessible to students, being open to feedback, and by consciously eliminating judgmental language from my interactions with students. Communicating clearly defined learning objectives is another approach that I use to promote a positive learning environment. Learning objectives for the course, individual sessions, and for assessments provide targets for students to achieve. Setting clear expectations reduces student anxiety and encourages students to take risks, thus enhancing deep learning.

In her letter of support, Camilla Piatkowski (BHSc'17) notes that an engaging, challenging and supportive learning environment empowers students and is an experience that she valued in my courses. Similarly, Anika Winn reflects in her support letter that the supportive learning environment that I fostered was central to her undergraduate experience and led to deep and lasting learning that she continues to apply in Law school. The support letters also indicate that students find my feedback constructive and supportive, and value the opportunity to provide feedback about my teaching practice.

Mentorship: Teaching beyond the classroom

One of the most valued aspects of my role as educator is the opportunity to mentor students, to be an "academic therapist". Getting to know students and learning about their goals and aspirations is both enjoyable and informative, as I gain insight into their needs and the ways in which the BHSc program can support student growth. I am known to have an "open-door policy" among students, as noted in the student support letters. Formally, I participate in the BHSc Mentorship program, in which faculty members are paired each academic year with BHSc student who wish to receive career mentoring and assistance in establishing networks for research and other job opportunities. However, I have also developed long-lasting informal mentoring relationships with many students. Mentoring mostly involves listening to students and getting them to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings, but sometimes I offer career advice, advice with academic planning, clarify graduate school opportunities, and very often provide reference support for graduate and professional school applications. Mentorship has also included connecting students with resources for their overall well-being, acting as a sounding-board, and helping students appreciate the importance of striving for life balance between academic, work and family and other commitments. Both of the student support letters provided note the positive impact that my role as a mentor has had on their academic and personal development. What these letters do not indicate is how rewarding these mentorship relationships have been to me.

Over the past three years, I have expanded my efforts beyond the classroom to include an educational leadership role, which has provided the opportunity to mentor colleagues as well. I have led a curriculum mapping project and worked with other teaching faculty to redefine program outcomes and to realign the Health & Society curriculum. In her support letter, Lindsay McLaren reflects that my leadership and mentorship has made an impact on her teaching practice and has supported her in improving learning experiences in her courses. This is high praise and encourages me to continue to grow in this role as Director to effect change and to have a much broader impact on students' learning journey in the BHSoc program.

Lastly, I feel a strong responsibility to mentor graduate students as they develop their skills to be future educators. As exemplified in the support letter written by Taryn Graham (former teaching assistant for HSOC 201), I encourage graduate teaching assistants (GAT) to develop teaching skills in a supportive way – through guest lectures that I help them prepare, opportunities to help develop assessments and rubrics, and by modelling “good” teaching in the classroom. A GAT is an excellent opportunity for mentorship in teaching skills, not just an extra set of hands for marking assignments.

My own journey of discovery

It would be impossible for me to assist discovery in students without reflecting on who I am as an educator. As much as I need to know students to be an effective “guide”, I need to know myself, my capabilities and deficits, and what shapes my teaching practice. When I first started teaching in 2011, my reflections on teaching were limited to a focus on course content, but have since grown to be much more introspective. As I took advantage of a number of teaching skills in building opportunities, including workshops at the (now) Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, I was more and more motivated to critically reflect and to refine my teaching practice. I have become more adept at using student feedback to improve clarification of expectations, designing learning strategies and enhancing my mentoring skills. As I reflect on the growth of teaching practice thus far, it gives me great pleasure that my efforts have been well received. Student evaluations of my teaching are positive and reassure me that my development as an educator is heading in the right direction. These evaluations also provided a road map for future improvement in my teaching practice. Moments of self-reflection have motivated continuous growth and have kept my teaching practice fresh. I fully appreciate that my development as an educator will be a life-long journey.