

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY FOR DARLENE XIOMARA RODRIGUEZ, PHD, MSW, MPA

I have never thought of myself as a philosopher, and other than my passion for Latin American dance, I am known for my practical approach to everything. Nevertheless, for me, teaching is an area where beauty and metaphor, things typically deemed “impractical”, are the touchstone of fine instruction.

I have always believed that if students can grasp the elegance of the mundane, if I can make the familiar seem strange, or if I can kaleidoscope their worldview just a few degrees, they will ignite—loving the subject with a wonder that will get them through the hard times. In short, my teaching recipe is like my life recipe: pragmatism with a dash of poetry, and sometimes, poetry with a dash of pragmatism.

Pragmatism Explained:

I use applied exercises and employ [M. David Merrill's](#) “Tell, Show, Do, Apply” instructional principles to produce positive student learning gains. The first two parts are focused on the instructor telling and showing students about a concept. This is followed by the learner attempting to do the task and applying it..

To illustrate how I employ these principles, I will share an example from my Research Methods course. When teaching students about reliability and validity, I start off by “telling them” through a lecture. I teach students how to identify and define the concepts; I relay important facts, rules, and procedures. I then move on to the strategy where I “show” them examples and scenarios ‘to help students see how the information is applied. This is followed by walking them through the well- known metaphor of a dartboard to explore how these are separate concepts and how they are related.

I then have them “do” an in-class activity for formative assessment. In this lesson, I actually bring safe dart boards to class. The students engage in several scenarios (i.e., reliable not valid, valid not reliable, neither reliable nor valid, both reliable and valid) to experience the four possible situations. After understanding the concepts, then they create their own situations and “test” each other to determine which scenario it is. Finally, students “apply” what they have learned in an individual assignment (e.g., exam, paper) or group project (e.g., group quiz) as a summative assessment. This fun and interactive pedagogy has consistently helped students firmly grasp the concept.

Because I believe learning is iterative, when I have students “do” or first practice something, I assign the grade for the assignment a lower percentage. This allows students to “fail forward” without fear of jeopardizing their overall grade. With students’ approval, I also showcase examples of their work so the class can identify what were the strong and weak points. From here, students complete the higher percentage task on their own, while having benefited from the peer review process and any additional instruction that I, their peers, or others provide.

I employ this strategy across all of my classes and have found that my varied instructional techniques aid students in not only learning the material for the moment, but using it to scaffold additional learning throughout my class and the program.

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Poetry Experienced:

The poetry in my teaching is stirred, and really, “tornadoed”, by my knowledge that I am here to make a difference and that we—students, faculty, those we serve—are all connected. I hunger to make a lasting impression on the world, specifically, on students and the community, not necessarily to leave a legacy for when I am gone, but to have a living legacy to share with others while I am here. As a result, I find myself involved in what seems an infinite number of lives from complete strangers to close friends, embedded in projects that help me stay in touch with what is important: making personal connections.

Genuine personal connections are key to education and the community work that supports my classroom instruction. So, I start the semester by immediately trying to lower barriers between myself and the students. For example, I tell my students, on the first day of class, that I operate under an adapted catchphrase for the Hair Club for Men®: “I am not only your teacher; I am also your student.” Smiles and chuckles invariably follow. Such small but significantly winsome tactics help me advance my overarching strategy: blueprinting, modeling, and developing an inclusive quality educational community in the classroom, the college, and in the community-at-large through research, service, and experiential learning that cultivate character and encourage world-changing civic engagement.

No matter how one teaches, I believe it is invaluable to identify a teaching “hero”, someone whose instructional aims resonate with one’s own heart and helps center their instruction. For me, that person was [Ernest Boyer](#), one of the champions of higher education and former director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, America’s oldest education-oriented think tank. Boyer’s thoughts, namely that education should integrate the development of the body, mind, and spirit in coherent learning environments, are the pivot point for all my teaching. So, using this thinking, I vowed to holistically sculpt students through methods that seamlessly integrate classroom teaching with “boots-on-the-ground” community service and research.

In the end, whether through my pragmatic poetry, relentless relationship building, community construction, or student sculpting, I want my learning partners to have a transformative experience. I generate long, unfolding, “aha moments” that help us look at our lives in relation to others and encourage strategic action for positive change. I want the classroom to move beyond the concrete walls that host our lessons to the outside world—where the heavens are the ceiling and earth is the floor. I want to inspire unorthodox thinking and creativity, knowledgeable debate, and self-reflection and application. When I teach, I want students to experience the lesson in a bone-deep, soul-tugging way that equips them with the tools to share it with others.

If I have inspired pragmatism or poetry in my students, then this is good.

If they have accomplished a sense of personal pragmatism or poetry in their work, then this is great. If I have been able to do both, even if in some small measure, then I consider this a blessing. A blessing that will be multiplied by my students as they carry out their life’s call to compassionate and committed public service.