

Teaching Philosophy

As an educator, I create learning environments that stimulate thought and promote student achievement. Lecture-based instruction, although effective when working with certain groups or under certain conditions, does not always lead to the type of deeper learning that is necessary to solidify student gains, so I give my students as many opportunities as possible to play an active role in their own learning. Through a combination of interesting writing situations, innovative techniques, and research-based practices, my students develop the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills that are needed to succeed in high school and beyond.

One of the significant issues that educators face is getting students interested in the material and encouraging them to be active learners. When students lack these necessary ingredients, teachers are often faced with passive compliance or ritual engagement, so in order to prevent students from becoming disinterested participants who are compliant but not truly engaged in the learning

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process, I think it is crucial for educators to bring a certain amount of ingenuity to the classroom and to create unique learning opportunities that resonate with their students. The mock trials I use in my ELA courses are a great example. While I do spend a significant amount of time covering traditional texts and teaching basic skills like grammar and punctuation, I also spend time covering critical issues like the limits of free speech, racial profiling and performance enhancing drugs in sports to increase student engagement. Over time I have found a number of mock trials produced by state bar associations that discuss some of these issues, so I have my students perform a mock trial after they have investigated and discussed a

topic. These trials are cognitively complex exercises that ask students to think critically, present arguments, evaluate sources, anticipate objections, craft carefully worded questions, and persuade a jury of their peers to adopt a certain position. An activity like this is not designed to replace traditional techniques or materials but to ensure that my students gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum by participating in a functional activity that is directly connected to the real world and undoubtedly related to ELA standards.

I also think it is important for educators to eliminate ritual engagement and student apathy by introducing interesting topics and targeting the interests of their audience. One unit that I produced that does just that asks students to identify some of the less publicized tactics real interrogators use to get information from capture suspects and then write an essay that explains how these tactics appear in the interrogation scene in *Crime and Punishment* and the torture scene in *1984*. I paired excerpts from the classic literary texts with a challenging non-fiction article and popular

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media clips from *Starsky and Hutch*, *Meet the Parents*, and *The Dark Knight*. But even if students are not interested in the topics, I believe educators need to invite their students to participate and eliminate all possible roadblocks by giving them a clear path to success. Each unit I create is planned with the end in mind so the students know the question they will need to answer before they begin to read and they can see that every activity is related to the culminating task: the text markings help them deconstruct the text and categorize information; the graphic organizers make it easier for them to thoroughly support a topic sentence; the short or extended responses can be refined and turned into body paragraphs in a argumentative or informative essay; and the final reflection highlights strengths and weaknesses in order to be even more successful in the future.

The aforementioned activities, I should mention, are entirely under the purview of ELA instructors. Traditional texts like *Antigone*, *Night*, and *Lord of the Flies* have their place in my classroom, and I teach them in relation to the state standards to the best of my ability, but my interests and my

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understanding of ELA standards push me to go beyond these traditional texts and incorporate a wide variety of topics and activities into my classroom. When my students are asked to analyze a transcript from a hostage negotiation to determine how the negotiator brings the violent and tension filled situation to a peaceful conclusion, they have to analyze the words and phrases in the text, understand the complex nature of the event,

comprehend the purpose behind the comments that are made by both the perpetrator and the

negotiator, and evaluate the techniques that the negotiator uses to resolve the crisis. All of these skills are directly related to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy.

My approach to teaching places unique demands on my students. In more traditional classrooms students are sometimes allowed to take in information without ever having to truly or fully invest themselves in the learning process. This type of passive consumerism, however, is not an option in the learning environments I create because the cognitive tasks I assign force students to play a more active role in the classroom. Thankfully, the students I teach are up to the challenge. When given an opportunity to debate a topic, when asked to act as lawyers for a fictional defendant, or when told to complete a graphic organizer in preparation for an essay or culminating activity, my students respond with action and enthusiasm. Moreover, these learning situations present a host of teachable moments in which I can correct errors, ask challenging questions, give solid academic advice, and add intellectual depth when necessary.

All in all, I think my teaching philosophy blends out-of-the-box thinking with the more traditional techniques that teachers use in the classroom. The end goal is to encourage students to take responsibility for their own academic development, and I think that can only be accomplished when teachers and students meet each other halfway and work together for the betterment and enhancement of both parties. Nothing, in my opinion, could more properly align the educational process than organizing the system in a manner that promotes professional success and student achievement.