

## **JAMES GIFFORD – Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

---

When I think of the instructors who inspired me to learn more, to learn beyond the classroom, and to pursue a career in education, they all held two contradictory traits: intentions for my learning (preparation) and a willingness to pursue my learning when it differed from those intentions (improvisation). Since my training has been equally in Music and Literature, I find this balance between improvisation and preparation apt for my teaching philosophy—a good performer prepares with specific outcomes in mind yet is willing to move away from those intentions in response to each unique performance. As an instructor, I have intentions and outcomes planned for my students, yet I must respond to the unpredictable learning that occurs.

University level instruction in the Arts engages students in a variety of ways, ranging from the purely emotional to the purely intellectual, the analytic and the aesthetic, although it most often takes place between these extremes while engaging both. With regard to pedagogy, I believe the university professor must consider the role both these forms of engagement can play as well as the limits of the teacher's role in encouraging such engagement. Literature instructors generally share a goal to facilitate intellectual and emotional connection with literary materials. We want students who care about texts and find an understanding of them, but the teacher's role in shaping a student's achievement of this goal must not be lost. Among the possible meanings for 'teaching' and 'learning' there are a number of problems such as 'intentionality,' 'activity'-oriented definitions, and 'result'-predicated definitions. There is no clear solution to whether teaching is an activity in itself or if it is parasitic to learning. Have I 'taught' if my students learn something other than I intended? Can teaching be an activity distinct from learning and what is learned? On what basis do I judge 'good' teaching? This is the mysterious element of teaching that I am unable to define; however, in this indecision I expect my students find a more rewarding educational scope. The teacher who relies on intentionality in teaching is well prepared, treating it as an activity that he or she undertakes as something distinct from learning. Likewise, the teacher who feels his or her activity is predicated by the student's learning and that such learning cannot be predetermined is more willing to approach a class socratically, with outlines being secondary to student engagement and participation. I believe that between these two approaches there is a more effective form of teaching that is closer to my own positive learning and teaching experiences. Student interests can be accommodated *while* pursuing knowledge that I, as the instructor, value and require.

I am likewise unwilling to either affirm or dismiss the task-oriented concepts of learning and education. Without learning, 'education' does not exist, but with regard to learning there is again a distinction between tasks and goals. What I 'learn' may be trivial, worthless, or even false, which seems to conflict with colloquial uses of the word. Teaching can involve these same problems. In this manner, I am unwilling to separate teaching from a goal-oriented definition, where there is predetermined knowledge that students must 'learn.' This sometimes raises ire in the Arts, where innovation is valued above recitation, and where skills are valued over a canon, but to return to my musical analogy, before I can be innovative in a performance I must know the materials very thoroughly as well as their contexts and the conventions surrounding them.

Despite this predetermined content to be learned, I also strive to accept how students may learn something valuable other than what I intend. In the Arts, this form of incidental learning is vital and implies students' genuine engagement with the materials. For these reasons, I can neither claim that the classroom should be entirely guided nor entirely improvised (nor entirely political or apolitical). Goals provide a direction and focus for possible learning, but should preclude other incidental learning that may occur. This

requires openness, such that *my* goals are valued but may be displaced. In order for this contingent factor to work in the classroom, the teacher must encourage genuine engagement with the material (either positive or negative, in an emotional and intellectual manner). At the same time, I must ‘teach’ the attributes that are generally considered valuable, true, and advantageous in our institutional context.

In other words, I must be willing to improvise when outcomes do not match my goals, but I also cannot sacrifice my goals to student engagement. The classroom experience always reconfigures my intentions and goals, with students ‘learning’ things I had not necessarily intended—a good instructor balances intentions with outcomes, preparation with improvisation. This applies to grammar and writing instruction (we need both engaging and correct writing from students) just as it applies to literary interpretation (texts are open but have contexts and limitations). Other problems include ‘education’ and ‘learning’ as independent of ‘teaching.’ This may seem to undervalue my role as a teacher in the classroom, but this humbling of the teacher is not derogatory—it emphasizes the core issues that should always be my focus: learning and education, the outcomes and the process. This focus avoids overly narrow teaching, undermining educational objectives for ulterior purposes (social or political), and indoctrination. Focusing on education and learning, even at the expense of teaching, curtails these problems.

With regard to ‘process,’ I turn to the ethics of my teaching, and my position is much simpler. I take a professional model, seeing my role as that of a profession. Were I a public school teacher, I would be governed by a code of ethics, both institutional and imposed by my professional affiliation. As well, I would face expectations from the public at large, to which I would be responsible. Such codes of behavior adhere to professions as diverse as pharmacists and doctors, police and lawyers, or accountants and therapists. While national consistency in professional bodies leaves some ambiguity here for university instructors, I nonetheless regard teaching as more than an occupation—it is a profession. With my institutional affiliation come privileges as well as obligations, and my conduct must adhere to the social duties, the respect for students and community, and the service that my affiliation implies. Otherwise, I have no basis for claiming the academic freedom this institutional affiliation grants me.

Is teaching success dependent on student learning? Is ‘learning’ an achievement term and is ‘teaching’ an activity? I am unable to fully answer these questions, but I believe this hesitation allows for the benefits from both possible answers. If teaching is primarily an activity, then as a ‘subject presumed to know,’ the teacher places students in a position of pursuing ‘what is known’ (ie: knowledge), whether I have such knowledge or not. Hence, my activities, whether or not they have a learning outcome, are valuable. Likewise, in that certain criteria are necessary for a continued and intensifying dialogue, learning is a series of quantified and rational achievements. But, the alternative is equally valuable: teaching as defined by achievement. My *role* as a teacher may be to act and perform in a socially defined manner, but my *value* ultimately resides in student learning. I may undertake several teaching activities, but I must ultimately direct my attentions to the students’ *learning* outcomes, just as I must beware of restraining learning to defined and quantified achievements. At the university level, this is particularly essential—a student who develops an enduring pursuit of knowledge is a nobler teaching goal for me than students whose achievements are limited to a quantified retention of facts.

In its haltingness, contradictions, contingency, and continued skepticism, I believe the approach to teaching I have outlined encourages students toward critical thinking skills and models of critical thought while eventually returning them to a space without clear answers. This is the blank space where we are all left to our own resources. This is the space where we properly belong.