

My Teaching Philosophy

Elizabeth Dutro
School of Education
University of Colorado at Boulder

I relish teaching because I'm guaranteed to learn from and be inspired by my encounters with students. In turn, teaching provides me with the opportunity to share my passion for and commitment to the content I teach and to, potentially, inspire students to feel a similar commitment and passion for their own learning. My goal is for students to leave my courses with a nuanced understanding of course content, an enthusiasm for ideas encountered in the course, a sense of teaching as an intellectual endeavor, and a desire to inspire learning in their own students. In my efforts to achieve these goals, I am guided by the following principles:

Teaching should be informed by a theoretical framework

This is what I share with students:

Literacies are social practices—meanings are always constructed in relation to an 'other', be it a person, a text, or our own past experiences and worldviews.

Literacies are cultural practices—the uses we make of literacy and the meanings we construct are always reflective of particular contexts.

Literacies are critical practices—literacy practices and what counts as literacy both shape and are shaped by power and ideology.

And, it is what I believe.

Viewing literacy as social, cultural, and critical provides the theoretical framework from which I build my courses and one that I believe will benefit the children whom my own students teach. This is also a framework that propels my own pedagogical practices.

I begin each semester building a **theoretical framework** with students. My goal is threefold: to provide them a sense of the theoretical orientations in the field of literacy; to lay the groundwork for the more practical work we undertake on classroom teaching methods and strategies; and, to provide a 'big picture' touchstone for us to return to throughout the semester. I explain to students that in any methods course it can become difficult to see the forest for the trees. It is necessary that we delve into the nitty gritty details of how to best support children's success through innovative teaching practices. However, it is also necessary that we not lose sight of the beliefs about literacy and learning that will inform those practices and our interactions with and expectations for students.

My teaching is informed by a **sociocultural view of learning**. Knowledge, from these perspectives, is actively constructed by learners in relation to social and cultural contexts. The knowledge that individuals construct varies according to previous experiences,

values, identities, and the immediate context of the learning situation. Knowledge, therefore, is dynamic rather than static and multiple rather than singular. This implies several features of classrooms that will best support learning. For instance, classrooms should be spaces where ideas and perspectives are freely shared and negotiated. Also, teachers and course texts cannot be viewed as receptacles of knowledge, but rather as sources, among many, of ideas. Additionally, students need to be actively involved in and take responsibility for their own learning. This leads me to: ***provide multiple opportunities for students to interact*** with one another around ideas encountered in courses; ***encourage students to be ‘critical friends’ for one another***—providing support through questioning and alternative perspectives—when planning instruction and assessment; ***always strive to create a safe, respectful, rigorous environment*** for intellectual exchange.

My teaching is also informed by **critical and feminist theories**. In addition to requiring attention to multiple perspectives, these theories require that all situations, certainly all learning situations, be viewed as implicated rather than neutral. In other words, all interactions, ideas, beliefs, etc. are informed by and inform the structures that work to empower or disempower individuals and groups. Therefore, critique of ideas and practices is crucial. As an advocate for children in urban schools, I find this particularly important. In order to engage in critique of existing ideas and perspectives, it is necessary to begin to “see”—to see those things whose very familiarity renders them invisible *and* to see those things that are unfamiliar and, therefore, challenge our assumptions. This leads me to: ***engage students in inquiry***—projects that encourage them to “read” the world against their assumptions, to see beyond the taken-for-granted (a mantra in my courses is Fred Erikson’s notion of ‘making the strange familiar and familiar strange’); ***encourage students to take risks in their projects***—to write in a new voice, to express strong opinions and ground them in evidence, and to share their ideas publicly; ***require students to talk with children*** and learn from those children’s ideas and experiences about how to best support them in classrooms; ***support student reflection*** on the implications of their teaching practices for children; ***provide information about current educational policies*** and opportunities for students to understand, question, and reflect on those policies and the implications for their teaching.

Teaching should convey and inspire enthusiasm for content

I attempt to model enthusiasm for the content I teach. Literacy is my life’s work; I am passionate about the content of my courses and I believe that I *must* convey that enthusiasm if I expect students to be engaged by the ideas they encounter. I also believe that learning should be fun, so strive to create a relaxed atmosphere where laughter is welcome and likely to occur.

Teaching should engage the community

I believe that learning should extend beyond the classroom walls. Teacher educators often urge preservice teachers to draw on community resources in their teaching of K-12 students. I model this for my students by planning experiences outside the university—

museums, public libraries, art galleries—that extend the ideas for the course and create awareness of community resources.

Teaching is dynamic

My belief that good teaching is a process, not a destination, requires that I pay close attention to student engagement, student work, and student feedback and make the adjustments necessary to best support learning. Viewing teaching as dynamic also requires that I infuse multiple and flexible methods of instruction and assessment into my practice to meet the needs of particular groups of students or the goals of particular projects. For instance, in an ethnography project in which I urge students to take risks in both the topic and mode of presentation for their work, I also take a risk and provide feedback to the class in a creative form that pushes the boundaries of what counts as assessment (e.g., a poem, a poem embedded in a slide show of student work, a ‘thought letter’ that incorporates an analysis of each students’ project, reading aloud from my own journaling about my teaching and the process of evaluating students’ work). I also seek opportunities to engage with new ideas and tools to improve my teaching—through conference sessions, professional readings, conversations with colleagues, and employing new technologies.

Teaching is about the lives that are lived amidst the learning

I believe that good teaching involves care. We have content to cover, ideas to encounter, and discussions to engage, but we all experience the joys and challenges of learning while living through the joys and challenges of life. I have never experienced a semester devoid of pain and grief. When dozens of people fill a room each week for 16 weeks at a stretch, the realities of life always accompany those people to their desks and some of those realities will be difficult. I have yet to live through a semester that does not find me weeping at least once for the suffering of a student. In turn, students have wept for me. It is compassion for one another that is one ingredient in the mortar that binds us as a classroom community.

It is my job as teacher to be available for students. Sometimes students’ needs are major, often they are minor, but when a student calls or emails, I answer as quickly as possible. And, when flexibility is possible and does not compromise my own or a student’s intellectual commitments to the course, I choose to be flexible. I am often in awe of students’ commitment to their education—stories of juggling work and classes, of making it successfully through a semester in spite of financial or family worries, of completing graduate work late and night, after a full day of teaching and tucking small children into bed. It is the least I can do to be aware of my students’ lives and model my belief that teaching is most meaningful when relationships exist and when those relationships matter.

I hope my students leave my courses inspired about literacy, learning, and teaching. I know I leave my courses inspired by students.