Philosophy of Teaching and Instructional Technology

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Introduction

Former U.S. Senator Nancy Kassebaum once said, "There can be infinite uses of the computer and of new age technology, but if the teachers themselves are not able to bring it into the classroom and make it work, then it fails." While I realize using the quote of a politician could be perceived as controversial, I believe that this quote is most appropriate when we look at how instructional technology is often used in educational institutions. So often, new and exciting equipment or software is purchased for educators to use that will "revolutionize instruction." Unfortunately, more often than not, these purchases sit in a corner and collect dust because adequate and comprehensive professional development is not implemented to allow instructors to incorporate these technologies effectively into the classroom. In a time of decreasing state funding and increased scrutiny of higher education from a multitude of stakeholders, we must be able to purchase and implement new instructional technologies that will not only benefit students but we must also ensure that educational professionals have the tools and the resources that they need to change what they are doing in the classroom.

Philosophy of Teaching

My teaching philosophy can best be summarized by saying that I am "student centered." I attempt to reach students on their own level by using various teaching methods as well as utilizing different styles of teaching and instructional execution. Because I teach in a community college, I enthusiastically embrace the idea of "open door" education. I realize this creates various obstacles; however, I find a great deal of satisfaction in overcoming those obstacles by helping my students to be successful in their future educational or career pursuits.

As a sociology and history instructor in a rural Alabama community college, I feel that I have a diverse and unique set of objectives in the execution of my teaching. First of all, my students come from a wide range of life situations, age groups, racial categories, and educational goals. Secondly, because I feel that a community college prepares students for two things, transfer to a university and entrance into the workforce, I must make sure that my courses are relevant to both groups by encouraging critical thinking skills, competency in the use of technology and information literacy, and the development of content understanding and relevancy in modern American society. Finally, my students must leave my classroom having met my learning expectations.

Teaching at a community college is truly a distinctive experience. It is my opinion that we have the most diverse classroom environments of any other educator. Community college teachers instruct a wide spectrum of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family situation, previous educational attainment, academic ability level, and life goals. So, with that in mind, it is critically important that I have a firm grasp on the learning needs and expectations of the people whose learning I influence for the brief time they are in my class. Understanding the diversity within

my classroom allows me to be more effective at making a connection with my students. For example, in both my history and sociology courses, my assignments and class discussions are inclusive of diverse peoples and multiculturalism. I design my curriculum this way for two reasons: 1.) By using a multicultural approach, it allows my students of various backgrounds to better connect to the content (in other words, I avoid the "dead white guy" approach in my history courses and 2.) It gives my students an opportunity to open their minds and reduce the many stereotypes and biases that they may have developed throughout their life course up to this point.

In addition to trying to create curriculum that is multicultural, I also realize that I'm preparing students for either university transfer or entrance into the workforce. Because of this, it is crucial that I instill them with practical skills that will equip them for experiences that lie ahead. I help my students develop critical thinking skills, information literacy, and technology competencies by requiring my students to do a number of activities within the online learning management system (LMS). Even though I may be teaching a lecture course, I still heavily use the LMS because I feel that using a computer and the internet is now a reality for ALL college courses. The activities that I require include opportunities for collaboration through wikis, blogs, and discussion forums. Within these various avenues of expression within the LMS, they are able to discuss primary document readings, pose and explore questions for further research, and present coherent and valid research findings. At the end of the day, all of these activities are designed with one major question in mind, "will my students learn what I want them to learn?" It is my hope by increasing collaboration both in-class and online and by using a variety of assessments, my students will have a significant learning experience.

Of course, at the end of the day, there are both history and sociology content-specific objectives that I require my students to learn. My philosophy here is simple—I present the material in such a way that they see relevance and never have to ask the question, "why am I taking this course?" It is easy for someone who is majoring in a multitude of fields to ask that question. As a result, each lesson has a theme that is connected to a historical event that still affects the students today or a social phenomenon in which each and every student has either witnessed or experienced. Through connection with real-life experiences, students find relevance and understanding that they may never have experienced before.

Philosophy of Instructional Technology

It is crucial that incorporation and use of technology blends well with a teacher's current teaching philosophy. It is important to use technology in ways that promote accessibility as well as peer and instructor collaboration. If the technology tools available do not address the students' varying learning styles, it is important to balance learning experiences with other media that do address these learning styles. Furthermore, it is important for instructors to understand the changing environment of not only higher education, but also digital learning. Staying current with research and trends is important for effective teachers. Finally, there are a great deal of concerns that students should be aware of in terms of online security and ethics. It is the responsibility of educators to expose students to current ethical and usage issues that could affect their future.

In her book, Brain-Based Teaching in the Digital Age, Marilee Sprenger (2010) explains that when designing instruction, we should keep various teaching styles in mind. Our students are changing and the use of technology is important to meet that change head on and address it in a way that will benefit students. Ultimately, whether we want to believe it or not, students of the digital age are in our classrooms, workplaces, and boardrooms. Furthermore, these digital natives are here to stay. Many seasoned college personnel choose to focus on what's wrong with this new era. Instead, they should be focusing how to engage students who have moved into the digital age. Effective teachers have a responsibility to use the technology tools, learn the digital dialogue, understand behavior and attempt to relate to students. The key to learning is relationships. By creating our own relationships with our students on their level in terms of digital usage, we will build stronger and more effective relationships with our students (Sprenger, 2010).

Technology now plays a much larger role in the lives of our students than ever before. If teachers want to address their students' various learning styles and interests, it is considered a best practice to incorporate new media and technology into their teaching. Technology has become the center of students' social interactions outside of school. Recent data suggests that today's students not only desire but need an engaging, media-rich learning experience to maximize their learning potential (Williamson & Redish, 2009). Pelz (2004) reports that effective teaching within an online environment requires instructors to engage the student in the content, promote interaction between the students and with the instructor, and maintain presence within the course. If instructors are not doing this, it could be argued that the course being taught is not effective in developing an environment conducive for learning.

Teachers should realize that learning will not always take the form they are most comfortable and familiar with. For example, reading books, magazines, and newspapers may be a large part of their daily routines, but these are becoming less a part of our students' daily activities. Reading appears to be becoming more of an electronic activity through the use of recent e-readers and online text. While teachers should connect with their students' outside lives and interests by incorporating new technology, teachers need to help create a balance, helping students to realize that there is still great value in the use of more traditional learning tools such as books and hands-on manipulative objects (Lee & Lee, 2010).

Beyond staying relevant with regard to instructional practices, educators should also plan to stay educated regarding the most current technology laws and want to always model legal and ethical practices for their students. It is important that administrators provide teachers with frequent feedback and evaluations in order to address any legal, safety, or security issues in a quick and effective manner. In order to encourage value for and the importance of the ethical and safe use of technology, teachers should engage learners in researching the responsibilities related to the use of digital tools and resources. Additionally, students need to be aware of the consequences of misuse. The responsible use of technology and information resources is an issue that is becoming more prevalent in colleges and universities especially as classroom technology usage and online learning continue to increase (ISTE, 2008).

Conclusion

At the end of the day, it is my opinion that the goal of higher education is to enrich the lives of students by preparing them for the 21st century workforce. To do this, it is critical to engage students in their learning and to maximize their potential in a multitude of ways. Higher education is about providing students with opportunities to be challenged and still succeed by finding a job and building the life they want.

Higher education is currently experiencing dramatic change. Technology has altered the way teachers and students communicate with and amongst themselves, the community, and even the world. New ways of communicating and sharing learning are constantly being introduced. Therefore, faculty must adapt and continuously explore and research new ways to make students' learning experiences both meaningful and engaging.

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to provide mentors and role models to students by engaging and training faculty and student service personnel through quality professional development. They also have a responsibility to cultivate a sense of community and belonging with students. We know that students who feel like they have someone at the institution who cares about them or if they feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to be completers. Every student that cannot find a member of the college faculty or staff to connect with, the institution has failed. Caring, compassion and empathy are cornerstones to a meaningful educational relationship.

Education is a collaborative effort that needs a strong vision that is shared by all stakeholders. Furthermore, especially a community is an essential extension of a successful community college. Relationships between a college and its community, whether educational, entrepreneurial, co-operative or charitable, should not just be encouraged but actively pursued. Colleges and universities with a strong leadership team that encourages and nurtures a meaningful and common vision can help students perceive learning as a lifelong journey. In doing so, an institution must encourage greatness and loathe mediocrity. Educators must maintain high expectations and strive to see students excel. Students must be given the opportunity to maximize their potential and they should be inspired to do so. Every student has the potential to attain greatness and be successful. The job of a community college instructor is to harness a student's abilities and set them free with the confidence and necessary toolbox to succeed.

Works Cited

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