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OMDE 610  
Assignment #1

## **REFLECTION OF PERSONAL TEACHING PHILOSOPHY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

If the spring graduation ceremony for the class of 2007 was special for each of the students and families, it was usual for the professors. As we stood in the alcove waiting to process, the comments invariably were on the meaning of the academic robes and colors. “What does the red mean?” “What school is that?” “Can Masters wear a gold tassel?” Vestiges of the academic tradition go back past the Colonial American times to the Middle Ages. Yes, academes love their traditions. For example, traditions are even more evident in the classroom where college professors have continued to provide lectures for their students just as they have for hundreds of years. The traditional instruction-centered paradigm is well entrenched in colleges and universities. But as Barr and Tagg suggest, the recent shift to the learning paradigm has offered a challenging new direction that seeks to coexist with the traditions of the past. (Barr & Tagg, 1995) I am personally struggling with innovative transitions since my experience with teaching technology began with the mimeograph machine. When I first began teaching junior high school in 1969 being technologically savvy meant knowing how to thread the 16mm projector. The teaching method then was “lecture-and-test”. When I started teaching in college in 1987 the teaching method was pretty much the same thing and even today as I walk past classrooms I witness the same teaching method.

## MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY – 20007 VERSION

The problem with a teaching philosophy is that as teacher should really have developed one before stepping into that first classroom. The reality is that developing a personal philosophy requires classroom experience. The philosophy can only come into focus after many hours and many years of dealing with students. Granted, my teaching philosophy today is not the same as it was twenty years ago (OK thirty years ago), nor is it the same as it was last year. Philosophy, like communication, changes with our experience and with our immediate environment. That being said, I can point to some relatively stable characteristics of my teaching philosophy: the uniqueness of each student and the ability of each student to synthesize.

First, I believe that a student comes to class the first day as an aggregate puddle of past experiences, attitudes, values, knowledge, motivations, and all of the other abstractions we can muster. This puddle offers a unique environment for the topics of my course to take hold and grow, thereby changing the puddle for the next educational environment. The challenge of teaching lies in the unique potential of each aggregate puddle. Second, every student at the college level has the capacity to synthesize knowledge from various perspectives and past experiences with new exposures. It is certain that this synthesis can occur either actually or vicariously. As noted in Mayes “. . . learners do not copy or absorb ideas from the external world, but must construct their concepts through active and personal experimentation and observation.” (Mayes, 2006, p. 14) Kirschner offers a discussion of the development of epistemological approaches to education philosophy from behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism culminating with the broad statement “The term constructivism has come to serve as an umbrella term for a wide diversity of views.” (Kirschner, 2004, 9) However I believe that as Bates and Poole note, constructivism “is essentially subjective in nature, constructed from our

perceptions and mutually agreed upon by conventions.” (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 28). The idea that we construct knowledge of our previous experiences and perceptions indicates a higher level of student, as we would expect to find with working adult students. I would add to my philosophical statement the term, phenomenology, as Littlejohn defines “comes from consciousness or the way in which persons come to understand objects and events by consciously experiencing them.” (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 203). The implication of these two theories, constructivism and phenomenology, leads me to think that an appropriate way of offering a course to online adult students is from a combination of the two theories, thereby allowing students to learn based on their prior knowledge and from hands on exercises.

As a teacher in online education I try to operationalize the philosophies mentioned above. However, as a learner I have found one aspect to be particularly troublesome. That is the importance placed on the use of online groups. Group assignments are common and much emphasis is placed on the value of student-to-student interaction. The available literature is consistent in advocating the value of student groups as a source of e-learning. Morrison advises that holistic thinking is a product of a “community of learners wherein dialogue and exchange of views and thoughts are the norm.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 108) Gabriel suggests that “team-building activities facilitate the forming, storming, norming and performing of teams in online environments. (Gabriel, 2007, p. 184) Collins points to one of the student changing roles as “students work as group members on more collaborative/cooperative assignments; group interaction is increased.” (Collins, 1996) I have observed in many classes that the format for group interaction begins with the instructor assigning students (usually arbitrarily) to various groups. The next step is to assign the group a project that must be completed by a given date. At that point the instructor either walks away or simply blends into the wallpaper to observe what

happens. The atmosphere is ripe for pitfalls to occur. Students frequently wait for some other member to post a message first, or students may feel uncomfortable in grouping in the online environment. The primary tension described by Rothwell may be even more magnified online where physical cues are absent, than in the face-to-face classroom setting where students have the opportunity to read nonverbal cues. (Rothwell, 1992, p. 61) Group norms may be harder to form online. Confusion about what to do and how to proceed is a common concomitant of early group forming activity. (Burtis & Turman, 2006, 118) These issues may make it difficult for groups to form. Identifying the appropriate roles may also make it difficult for online groups to focus on the task.

My philosophy encourages helping in the forming and norming stages of group development and assisting the students in the co-construction of knowledge through the grouping process. First I believe the instructor should require an innocuous team project such as naming each group. After all who wants to be “Group D” when you can call yourselves “*The Foxy Five*”? This project helps establish cohesion and encourage group identity. Second, I suggest that instructors offer roles that group members can fill. For example, I ask my students to pick a coordinator (not a leader) and a recorder (secretary). These two simple projects are done early and quickly without the encumbrance of an assignment. After that is done, I submit an assignment to the groups and then I monitor their progress. My experience since starting this format shows a dramatic increase in group productivity and reduced group complaints. I see this as a manifestation of the phenomenology approach and a way to encourage students to co-construct their learning experiences.

## CONCLUSION

In summary I position myself as a phenomeno-constructivist. Don't look it up – I just invented the term. But it serves to show my interest in allowing students to take advantage of their own unique backgrounds and experiences. Allowing and encouraging that background to actively interact with the course content and with other students in an online environment is an exciting vision for me. My goal is to move from the traditions of the past to the challenges of the future in the e-learning world.

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