

Fundamentals and Exploration: My Philosophy of Teaching

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As a result of my training as a teacher, my love of learning, and my personal beliefs about education, my teaching philosophy is a combination of progressivism and essentialism. As a progressivist, I believe in the importance of teaching content and skills that are relevant and interesting to students and allowing them to explore and experiment with topics and ideas. At the same time, as a supporter of some of the ideals of essentialism, I support teaching basic content and skills that will prepare my students to live full lives in society and adapt to the current times. My personal philosophy of teaching combines both of these ideals into a philosophy that will serve my students well and help them become active and productive people with a lifelong love of learning.

According to the Oregon State School of Education website, the philosophy of progressivism emphasizes allowing students to learn by experimentation and seek out answers to questions concerning topics that are relevant to them (Cohen, 1999). I wholeheartedly agree with these ideas; I believe that students learn best when they create their own questions and seek out the answers to them. It is important for students to seek out answers and for teachers to be facilitators and encouragers as students seek those answers. One way that I plan to model this is by honestly telling my students when I do not have all the answers and then showing them how I will find out the answers. For example, if a student raises a question in the “Want to Know” section of a K-W-L chart and the answer is never addressed during the unit, the students and I will together research the answer in an appropriate way, using library, Internet, or other resources. I believe that giving students the freedom to ask questions and the tools to find the answers will spark a continued love of learning for its own sake and give them confidence to seek answers to other questions in the future.

Progressivism also advocates for a respect for diversity, “meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity” (John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, 2002). As a result of my experiences with teaching English in Bulgaria and also with working with gifted programs, English language learners, and special education students in the United States, I have been exposed to diversity in many forms, and I feel strongly that diversity should be celebrated and explored. Students should be able to explore the things they love and be challenged on their levels of ability. They should also feel comfortable in the classroom as a place where they are welcomed and accepted regardless of their differences in ability, language, or culture.

In practice, I plan to carry out the ideal of celebrating diversity by actively encouraging students to share about their home cultures in their writing and artwork in the classroom and in any other appropriate venues, such as a show-and-tell time. I also plan to decorate the classroom with items from different cultures, such as flags and posters of different nations, so that students can see examples of the world beyond their classroom and understand that the world is not just centered on where they are. In an increasingly global society, it is important for students to be exposed to different cultures and nations in order to prepare them for the future and foster cultural awareness and understanding, both as students who can benefit from learning about their world and also as people who will benefit from a shared understanding of cultural differences and a willingness to accept others who are different from themselves.

While progressivism focuses on allowing students to explore topics that interest them, essentialism focuses on transmitting to students an essential body of knowledge that will serve them practically in the future, as well as key skills such as a strong work ethic, respect for authority, and discipline (Cohen, 1999). Although this idea may seem to conflict with the

progressivist beliefs mentioned earlier in this paper, I believe that the two may be meshed together. Students can and should be allowed to explore topics that interest them within the boundaries of important content skills such as reading, math, technology, science, and history. For example, in a unit on a certain historical period, such as the Civil Rights Movement, students may be given the freedom to explore topics of interest within that overarching theme, such as the March on Washington, Freedom Rides, and sit-ins. In this way, students will learn important information that will help them in society while still being able to explore topics of interest and learn research skills.

Essentialism's encouragement of practical and time-relevant teaching is especially important to me. I believe that students should receive an education that prepares them for their futures, including practical knowledge, such as knowing how to use various forms of technology creatively and efficiently, and other attitudes and skills, such as learning to work hard, respect authority, and think critically. These are all parts of preparing a student for life outside his or her school district. Instruction in certain areas, such as technology and history, should change as time moves forward and those areas also advance; however, instruction in basic facts, such as multiplication tables, must remain constant as necessary skills for life, although the style of the content delivery may change.

For these reasons, I plan to emphasize the core basics in my classroom that my students should know, but I will not limit them to these basics; rather, I will encourage them to go beyond the basics to study what interests them. My students will be prepared for their futures both in learning the basics that are necessary for their lives outside of the classroom and also in discovering a joy of learning through active experimentation and exploration.

## References

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