

Kathy Meehan's Big Teaching Philosophy

I still rely on the power of well-organized instruction of current content, respect, critical thinking, and positive illusions to effectively guide my teaching, but my instructional goal have broadened as a result of a student comment this summer. I now want to make my students big.

The student approached me after a difficult class exploring the impact of organizational structure on agency results. I had illustrated dry systems concepts with a case study of the Department of Children, Youth and Family. My PowerPoint detailing administrative structures, intended goals and unintended consequences was embedded with YouTube clips of children that have died from child abuse. I focused on three of the 124 children reported to have died since 2001 "while known to Child Protective Services" because in-depth investigations following their deaths revealed structures that enabled children to fall terribly between the cracks. A non-native English speaking student had tears in her eyes after class. "You break my heart, Mrs. Meehan!" She began to leave the classroom and turned back to quietly add "But you make me big." When asked to tell me more about what "big" meant, she replied "Before this class, I never knew how much I was needed. I never knew what to do to make things different. You make me big enough to change things."

What does a student need to know to become big enough? First, they must be able to think. Critical thinking is a common objective on course syllabi, but this vague goal appears as useful as exhorting students to "aim for the stars!" How, specifically, does one hit a star - or think critically? Instructors must define and demystify this goal and provide "how to" guidelines. I teach my students a six step processing model that guides them through thinking about factual information and distressing internship experiences. They learn to gather data, reflect, identify relevant theory/knowledge, examine dissonance, articulate learning using a professional vocabulary and finally, to develop a plan. As we repeatedly use the model over three courses, students develop the ability to frame critically important questions, consider theory, assess information, identify options and reach a well-reasoned conclusion. My courses are far from the first in which the students must think, but students often tell me that this is the first time they have become metacognitively aware of their thought process. Students appear to come to the senior capstone internship experience with discrete modules of knowledge. The processing model enables them to integrate their knowledge and critically think about problems and solutions.

Second, as I work to enable a student to become big, I guide students to consider thoughtful questions that lead to development of the personal framework of ethics, values and theory that will inform their professional careers and lives. In the final step to becoming big, students further develop their ability to become self-motivated lifelong learners in my student-led internship sequence classes. Caring attention to student questions and comments allows me to deliver the right information at the right time in the way most likely to be heard and result in achievement of our learning objectives.

I also develop respectful relationships with my diversity-rich students. My students deserve the same courtesy that I show peers and supervisors. The fact that they have, by virtue of registering for my class, given me permission to guide their learning does not give me permission to be insensitive, condescending, or rude. Students invest time, effort and money in education and I help students achieve the highest levels of success by offering engaging, well-organized instruction, coursework linked to course objectives, clear assignment directions and detailed grading rubrics.

Finally, I understand that is an illusion that I am responsible for all that occurs in my classroom, but as I can only control my own actions, it is an empowering illusion to see myself as responsible for, and capable of creating, student learning and transformation. I take responsibility for helping each of my students become big.