

## Teaching Philosophy - Verónica Montecinos, September 2012

Succinctly, my teaching philosophy can be said to rest on three basic beliefs: a) becoming a better teacher requires, above all, a struggle to become a superior learner; b) in our times, the fulfillment of ethical imperatives in undergraduate education involves addressing students as global citizens; and c) the institutional context of teaching is as important a target for innovative improvement as is the classroom.

I came to these far from original realizations not suddenly or by the embracement of an encompassing pedagogical principle but through the power of daily practice and a bit of self-discovery. At a turning point in my career, I began to anchor all the General Education courses I was scheduled to teach into a more globally focused approach. This meant amassing for my own and my students' benefit a new set of interpretive skills and resources; I had to become more knowledgeable about history and comparative literature, for example, and go beyond my areas of expertise in Latin America and Western Europe. As I educated myself more broadly to teach more effectively, my teaching developed gradually into a more enriching enterprise, with more systematic but relatable allusions to socio-economic changes, political history, maps, media and advertisement, films, even art and poetry.

By now, I regularly resort to a kind of shadow template to connect course contents and student activities to the wider concerns of public officials and people around the world. Often my courses are described as eye openers, especially if students are not well acquainted with the complexities of geography, history or current affairs. The experience of learning that the realities of distant nations are not separate from their own reality and that a better understanding of one improves their appreciation of the other is perceived by many students as akin to an individual venture, a sort of consciousness awakening. When encouraged to regard education as a path to personal growth, students seem more willing to be rigorous and disciplined (I request that a weekly summary of the readings be sent by email before the material is covered in lectures). I use the newspaper readership program to add a feeling of empowerment, allowing students to deliberate on the day's top issues and share new knowledge with friends and family (students must bring their copy of the New York Times to every class). In this context, research projects (on Haiti, South Asia, Latin America, East Asia, Eastern Europe, for example) and exam essays serve as opportunities to reinforce international awareness and analytical competence.

Yet guiding students to think of themselves as civic actors immersed in an interdependent world cannot be the task of a single course or a single discipline. I have been lucky to find a group of colleagues open to collaborate on new forms of teaching; as a result, our campus currently offers an internationalized curriculum based on collective experimentation of which the Teaching International Program (TI) is a main example. TI consists of a yearly series of faculty and student activities focused on the study of different regions of the world and selected global topics (human rights, food security, among others). The TI initiative has greatly enhanced the overall campus academic climate and I am proud that almost a decade after I proposed this program, the majority of our campus faculty members are to various degrees involved in Teaching International. Moreover, the Faculty Senate at Greater Allegheny recently created a new standing committee on Globalization and Sustainability, a formal recognition of the importance of what has been accomplished in this area.

In sum, teaching with an eye on real world events is a great incentive to keep learning; students in my classes discover that the value of education lies in the ability to act as deliberating citizens as well as in the acquisition of specialized skills. I have striven to promote greater interdisciplinary dialogue through my research and other academic work, convinced that in our global era, teaching can best be done within flexible institutional frameworks. I appreciate my good fortune in having joined the teaching profession, one of the most noble and promising conduits for social improvement.