

## Teaching Philosophy – Jeff Sharp, Associate Professor of Business Law

Students are quick to recognize that time and the focus of attention are valuable and limited resources. We, as their instructors, are engaged in a competition for the allocation of these resources. In making a decision to invest, students appear to be asking the following questions regarding how engaged they are going to be regarding the course content and its delivery:

1. Is this important (significant) to me?
2. Is this relevant to me?

**Significance:** It is imperative to articulate why the material is significant – be it foundational or by a standard created by an academic, industry or professional board. If I cannot make the case for its importance from the outset, then the value of the course and the teaching will be relegated by the students into an “institutional hurdle” category (sometimes called “waste but required”). There will be little effective learning in that environment. While it may seem obvious, this principle is often overlooked.

**Relevance:** Learning involves connecting new ideas and information to that which one already knows or possesses. The key is to maximize the opportunity to make those connections. With complex material and diverse classes, I have a greater chance to create those connections through an undercurrent of “**cultural relevance**” throughout the delivery of the course content. This means designing and delivering the subject matter in a context that brings personal meaning to a student either through reference to an experience or through a believable projection of one’s life into such an experience. This involves understanding the interests (and concerns) of students across many groups. Being mindful of cultural relevance also provides a possibility for communicating material from multiple directions – thus casting a wider net for the various learning styles. Social media has actually made this information increasingly accessible. *Twitter*, for example, is a very efficient tool for monitoring social trends in the student community.

In support of Significance & Relevance, I believe the following can contribute to teaching excellence:

**Quick Pacing:** A slow class pace can lead to loss of focus. While this is often blamed on over-exposure to electronic media, there is evidence that pre-dates television suggesting that those who speak or present material in a quickened pace are more likely to be understood. A quick pace must be planned and not appear hurried. That is why great classes involve considerable planning. Speed can always be reduced if needed.

**The Recurring Hook:** The problem with speed is fatigue. A moment of mental rest built into a rigorous class session can have the same positive impact as physical rest. A moment of light-hearted escape in the form of a recurring pattern can lead students to engage and look forward to how the next transitional moment will extend the pattern. Examples include a serialized pattern of short news stories of peculiar behavior building to a late semester “payoff” final story, themed unusual (and short) video clips, etc. Student feedback indicates this technique has contributed to a more relaxed focus while also providing an additional incentive to attend class.

**Rigor:** In terms of course quality, designing challenging assignments and examinations cannot be overlooked. While not always popular, academic rigor gets the best out of students in attendance, engagement, and pride in accomplishment.

**Social Rewards:** I provide class recognition with token rewards – offered only for the top tier of achievement and only twice per semester. It is often a piece of bubble gum. Many students have reported that they were motivated to invest even more in the course in order to compete for a single piece of gum. Clearly gum was not the object. This peer recognition in a small community is a motivator with little risk of side effects. The reception of the class is jovial and supportive.