

2. Teaching philosophy—one page John Gamble

The longer I have taught, the simpler and more pragmatic my teaching philosophy has become. And the more I have come to realize the significance of seemingly unrelated events. Several early experiences taught me two things (1) the intellectual excitement of finding connections among disciplines and (2) the importance of knowing students as individuals.

My first experience with college teaching was in 1963 when I entered the College of Wooster planning to major in Chemistry. My Chemistry professor asked me a question. I knew the answer but, due to my stuttering, could not answer and dropped the course. To this day, in my interactions with students, I try to understand the person beyond the occupant of a classroom seat for 150 minutes a week.

My love of multidisciplinary approaches was kindled by two experiences. At Wooster I took a calculus course from the Head of the Math Department who, as an undergraduate, had triple majored in Math, Greek and French. In class one day, he digressed to explain number systems, pointing out that French uses *quatre-vingts* (four 20s) for 80 because the peoples of ancient Gaul counted in 20s. My fascination with linkages among seemingly disparate subjects had begun.

My inclination became a conviction when, in 1971, I joined the faculty at the University of Rhode Island. There I was thrown into multidisciplinary teaching: Economics, Engineering, Geography, Law, Oceanography, and Political Science with a diverse group of students including senior military officers. I emerged, alive, with an increased commitment to multidisciplinary teaching.

Here are the main elements of my philosophy. I emphasize my because effective teaching is individualistic and idiosyncratic. One size does not fit all.

- ***Explain why the subject is important.*** Students have become more demanding, often expecting immediate, tangible benefits from their courses. I explain that Political Science studies governments, in all their aspects, including what governments should do, can do, and have no business doing. Any job, and life itself, will involve understanding governments and dealing more effectively with them.
- ***Explain the subject in a way appropriate to the students while being diligent about putting facts into context and explaining linkages to other fields.*** “Know your audience,” might sound trite, but it is vital. In the first week, I assess background, prior knowledge, prejudices about the subject, etc. I stress important “facts” but also emphasize the context, often requiring looking beyond Political Science. I revisit core concepts—often once is not enough.
- ***Be sensitive to individual students’ needs while remembering academic rigor is paramount.*** Watch for the problems and help as you can, in class, on quizzes, via colleagues. Give students ample opportunity to see you and to discuss concerns. I am in my office a lot, including Saturday office hours. Often gentle, informal advice given in the right way at the right time can make an enormous difference. My most rewarding experience in this area was a student with Aspergers syndrome who, at age 14, had been told by a psychiatrist that he should no even consider college. He became a Schreyer Scholar, wrote his thesis under my direction, and has completed law school.
- ***Realize humor is a powerful teaching tool; use it often and strategically.*** For example, I created a hypothetical student who does almost everything wrong. I throw chalk, very accurately up to 30 feet with either hand. Usually this “weapon” is directed at good students who refuse to “think hard”— no injuries in more than 1,500 throws. Both techniques evolved through trial and error and have proven to be effective and efficient ways to improve communication and open minds.

Summing up: At my core, I am an idealist. That idealism must be used carefully to improve my teaching. What will the students retain and apply throughout their lives and why? It is not about me and not just about the students. It is about helping the students to begin to understand concepts and ideas that are neither simple nor confined to a single discipline. If I can start that understanding, I am happier (but never satisfied). I hope my calculus teacher would approve.