

Teaching. It is something we all do. Everyone at some point in time teaches another human being. Often, we teach without even knowing it, simply by example. But deliberate teaching requires passion and a belief that your instruction can potentially improve a student's wellbeing.

As a first-generation college student from southeast Texas, I was sent off to college to increase my earning potential, not necessarily to acquire an education. But the captivating stories told by Dr. Greg Whitlock in an introduction to philosophy class and the sheer passion about the enlightening world of anthropology from Dr. Amelie Bartolino put me on a different path – an inquisitive one, that has been both exciting and rewarding.

Fortunately, that path eventually led me here, to Penn State, where I get to teach others about the fascinating subject of anthropology. It practically sells itself because anthropology is all around us. I mean, who is not interested in learning about how strange we all are? How different. But in the end, how alike. And that truth is what motivates me. Sure, we may look different, worship different gods, speak different languages, and have different worldviews. But when we focus on the similarities, it often helps us to appreciate the differences.

My teaching style is conversational and down-to-earth. My goal is to make the students feel comfortable, for them to feel like they know me. Keeping the class engaged is also important. I want the students to laugh, to enjoy sitting through lecture. Maybe some will even look forward to coming to class. I strive to make my classes interesting. For example, last semester I had to miss class to travel for an ongoing project. Instead of showing a film or having a guest lecturer, I decided to surprise the students by Skyping in with the entire class and taking them around my field site in central Mexico.

The classroom is no doubt an important educational venue, but I find it equally significant for them to get a healthy dose of experiential learning. One such project for my Anthropology of Alcohol course involves the tailgating culture at Beaver Stadium. First, the students observe tailgating behavior on game day. Early the next morning we inventory (quantity and brands) the alcohol refuse left behind. This archaeological exercise helps the students 1) see that archaeology is not just ancient burials, temples, and arrowheads, but is also a beer can dropped on the ground 12 hours ago. And 2) the students begin to see patterns based on the "quality" (i.e. cost) of the goods consumed. The reserved parking closer to the stadium are far more expensive than the general parking lots further away. Near the stadium we find craft beer bottles and high-end liquors versus the cans of Natural Light and cheap vodka found in the hinterlands. The students are then able to infer socio-economic status based on the material culture left behind.

Humans learn through association, by building on the familiar. It is for this reason I decided to focus on something that every culture in the world has a relationship with – alcohol. Everyone has an opinion about alcohol. Especially college students. Making alcohol the central theme of my teaching and research allows me to reach a much wider audience. To share with them my passion for an area of study that can have a monumental impact on the way one sees the world, as it did for me.

Teaching a course on alcohol provides a wonderful opportunity for students to make connections through real life experiences. Every semester I invite a representative from Penn State's Gender Equity Center to discuss drinking and sexual assault. And last spring Jim and Evelyn Piazza presented a lecture on alcohol and hazing. Their bravery in detailing the events that led to the death of their son, Timothy, was one of the most powerful moments I have ever experienced. I am pleased they will be returning each semester to deliver this crucial message.

With teaching comes responsibility. With teaching comes an obligation to ensure that the information being disseminated will provide an opportunity for positive growth. When a student leaves my classroom, I simply want them to have a healthier appreciation for different cultures, an increased respect for others, and a stronger sense of self. Then hopefully they too will teach others – even if it is only by example.