

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

On the first day of my Law of Mass Communications course this semester, I polled the class to see how many thought the subject matter was going to dreadfully dull. A few brave souls raised their hands – many other kindred spirits undoubtedly agreed in silence. Then I asked how many thought the course was going to be tremendously difficult – it is *law*, after all – and many more were willing to acquiesce to the underlying expectation of my inquiry. I told them it was my job this semester to debunk both of those predispositions. In fact, that has been my job for the past 22 years. To be truthful, it is not really a difficult task. It is a subject matter to which I have dedicated my professional life and one that truly excites and inspires me. As long as I put into practice my teaching philosophy for more than two decades, I can share that feeling with my students each semester and assist them on journey to understanding and enjoying what might otherwise seem an intractable enterprise.

My teaching philosophy is not daunting or particularly profound. It is centered on the simple premise of “enjoy what you do and enjoy sharing what you do with others.” To that end, I have incorporated a few tenets into my classroom work that have helped to guide my performance for more than two decades.

Topping the list is this simple maxim: A teacher must be honestly enthusiastic toward his or her subject matter in order to generate interest by the students – and hence student learning. Enthusiasm is contagious in a learning environment just as the lack of it is fatal. Because my research into contemporary First Amendment issues and my service to the profession and the public through the Pennsylvania Center for the First Amendment often results in *amicus curiae* briefs to courts or legislative work on the state and federal levels, I involve my students through every step of the process. I always seek to bring my current research work into the classroom. By way of illustration, this fall I filed *amicus curiae* briefs in two cases pending before the United States Supreme Court. Undergraduates who work in my Center (typically a half dozen or so students each semester who have completed my course in a previous semester) worked on the legal research for those briefs, read drafts of the briefs and, by doing so, now see the application of their classroom learning into something tangible with real-world impact. For students currently enrolled in my course, by learning about the briefs and the legal arguments raised (which they read) or legislative efforts (examining drafts of legislation), they come to understand that the material they are studying is real.

Focusing on the “reality” in law is the second key tenet. My goal in teaching about the law is to focus on the people involved. It is the stories behind the cases that capture the students’ interests. If I succeed in helping the students feel emotions for the people behind the cases – whether the emotion is sympathy, empathy, anger or disgust – I can easily get them to understand the law that resolved the case. Moreover, they will remember it because it is real.

My approach to teaching case law is to start with more current material – perhaps an F.C.C. inquiry about the animated television program “Family Guy” or a defamation suit arising out of a Facebook page – points of reference understood by this generation of students. Fortunately, because law is based on an historical method, the case precedent that guides the Commission or the courts in handling current cases becomes part of the analysis, but learning and applying it is much more palatable because students can relate to the current issue at hand.

Finally, the key to successful classroom learning is the environment, and the instructor sets the tone. From my first days in the classroom to the present, I have always strived to create a friendly atmosphere, kept purposely light through humor, where even the most self-conscious student will feel comfortable participating. This is true whether I am teaching a ten-person seminar or in a room packed with 225 students.