

Teaching Philosophy, Nicholas J. Rowland, Penn State Altoona (1 page)

Actively engaging students with nontrivial opportunities for personal growth and externally recognized achievement captures my fundamental understanding of the nature and function of higher teaching and higher learning. This philosophy is active. I use it on a daily basis to guide me on the path toward excellence, primarily for my students, but also for my own personal and professional development. To this end, I elaborate.

By *engaging*, I am referring to opportunities for students to meaningfully engage with faculty, staff, and with each other, within the context of a course or within a broader scholarly, local, or campus community. When I think of this, I think about Wes. He knew students needed internships when he came to see me. That was about it. That, and he had no money so he could not work for free in a traditional internship arrangement. Working closely with our Internship Coordinator, Wes and I hatched an innovative plan. Wes got a job as an auxiliary police officer at Penn State football games, and, like a sociologist, he transformed his internship experiences into ethnographic data through daily disciplined documentation. Wes published a piece about his experience in the *Centre Daily Times*, and, afterward, we – student, faculty, and staff – generalized the model and presented it at the *AACU* and *National Society for Experiential Education*. The model we developed now serves as the core of an internship prep course in that I co-teach. Recently, I ran into Wes. He now works in Harrisburg for the state, unsurprisingly, conducting research.

By *nontrivial*, I am referring to opportunities to publish, present, or perfect a skill. When I think of this, I think about Brooke. She refers to me as her “mentor,” even now as a Ph.D. candidate at Kent State. But the reverse is also true. She dared me to open an undergraduate research lab in order to offer students a place to actually “do” sociology. I am glad that I had the courage to listen to her, for opening that lab is my single proudest accomplishment as a faculty member. The training is relentless, but students report loving it. The lab has been a vehicle for fostering undergraduate energies into peer-reviewed articles, professional book reviews, dozens of presentations, and award-winning undergraduate research posters at Penn State’s annual exhibitions. It all came full-circle this month when Brooke invited me to speak at a panel featuring some of my former and now graduated students. Being invited to the *Pennsylvania Sociological Society* meeting was no coincidence. Years ago, *PSS* was her first chance to present her scholarship.

By *growth* and *success*, I am referring to opportunities that cultivate personal and professional transformation. When I think of this, I think about Chris. After leaving the military, Chris had four hard, low-GPA semesters. Ready to drop out, I saw a young man ready to deliver, if only somebody would demand something from him. After joining the research lab, he was on the Dean’s List and stayed on it until graduation. The power of the lab is primarily a function of our ability to coproduce a community of scholarship and learning. What Chris found was the opportunity to assist on projects, but also the chance to act as a mentor to fresh lab members. The crossroads for Chris came during his senior fall semester. After reviewing his senior thesis, I had to tell Chris that his work was not acceptable. When I suggested a full rewrite during the conversation, he paused, crushed, and then bravely responded, “This is an opportunity for growth.” Now a graduate student, Chris presented his new empirical work alongside Brooke and I at *PSS* this year.

Fostering students through opportunities that are *engaging*, *nontrivial*, and that lead to palpable growth and professional success is my philosophy and my purpose.