

## Teaching Philosophy - Matthew Parkinson

My teaching philosophy is simple: *inspire students to do hard things*. There are many distractions competing for a student's time and attention—a fact sometimes used as rationale for scaling back our expectations as educators. I believe the opposite is true: it is more important than ever that we have high expectations for our students. Reinforcing the notion that failure is acceptable simply because the task is hard is counterproductive. Difficult problems are much better than easy ones at capturing focus and engaging the sustained effort that produces true success and learning. When my students leave class I want them to be confident and engaged; I also want them to enjoy life, each other, and the many opportunities that await them.

The students and I will work hard together. I expect great things of them and I encourage the students to expect great things of me. At the start of each semester, the students and I set goals for what we will achieve as a class. To help them to envision what is possible, I provide examples of the best work from previous semesters. I also tell them that now that the trail has been blazed, we are obligated to push further, do better. And semester after semester, year after year, we do. And we love doing it.

Since education is a collaborative activity, the students assess the class in general and me in particular at several points throughout the semester. This helps me to understand their needs and expectations and make sure that they are being addressed. Through this process my courses and teaching style have evolved into “live”, interactive affairs. My students provide many of the examples that are used to illustrate the important points in the course. When it is unlikely that they will have the experience necessary to provide the examples, we first obtain it through primers and hands-on activities. Then we reflect on the exercises to determine how they fit into the context of our learning objectives and outcomes.

The students know that I am committed to them and that their success is my primary objective. I try to convey this while maintaining boundaries around my other work and family responsibilities. To reconcile these demands, my week is divided into periods of “protected time” and “extreme availability” (during which the students in my courses are the first priority). Although students seldom make use of the many hours available to them each day, they love that they can get a near-immediate response to emails very late at night—no matter where I am in the world.

There is a sense of joy and accomplishment when we do something difficult. These feelings resonate with each of us. We must set grand goals, for ourselves and our students, then work together to achieve them.