

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY ____ Sherry Corneal

I regard teaching as my calling. I fell in love with teaching when I taught my first class as a graduate student and my passion has never waned. I begin each semester with a sense of excitement about sharing my passion for the material and the intention to create an experience for my students that will empower them to use their voice and understand they are in relationship with me and a community of learners. My reward comes when they tell me that they now “think differently” than before, that they felt as though I ‘really cared’ about what they had to say, and that they ‘never wanted to miss a class.’ I see my teaching as conversational, experiential, and playful. I will speak to each of these aspects in concrete terms.

My teaching is conversational. As a teacher and a person, I strive to be authentic. I know my authenticity enables the student to respond authentically. I present material as speculative, open for discussion, and able to be attached to the student’s experience. Whether I am teaching a class of 600 students or 40 students, I must have eye contact and conversation. I have never taught, and will never teach, in a dark room using power point. In smaller classes I write important points on the board and we pause to discuss those points. In my class of 600, I use simple, sparse overheads. In that class I roam the auditorium using a handheld microphone so that students’ comments and questions may be heard. Conversations do not involve simply an answer to a question being asked, but rather begins with a dialogue that others can join. I push and prod in a genuine, supportive manner. I ask “Why do you think marriages fail?” A student says ‘Because people don’t communicate.’ I say “What if I said to you that people are always communicating? What might I be saying to you if you wanted to talk to me about something I did that hurt you and I said that I didn’t want to talk? Am I communicating?” We then explore the fear and longing beneath this defensive maneuver of not wanting to talk. Students begin to understand the depth and complexity beneath defensiveness, and of being in relationship, through our conversation. Much better than if I had said “good...who else has an idea?”

My teaching is experiential. I teach a 400 level course that examines relationships from the perspective of Relational Psychology. In addition to studying the topics of connection, disconnection, and healing disconnection in relationships, students complete a course project using qualitative methods to explore an individual’s experience of being in relationship with a parent. (I have included a description of this assignment in my materials.) Rather than simply learning about ‘deep listening’ students must become deep listeners. The student must conduct a careful interview, asking the participant for deeper meanings, using probes, and making his or her own decisions regarding what themes characterize the relationship. In addition, the student shares his or her results and experience of conducting the interview and analyzing the narrative in subsequent classroom discussions. In another 400 level course an assignment involves writing a paper which asks a thoughtful question about something that interested the student in a book we all are reading. The student must ask a thoughtful question and then try to answer the question him or herself. These thoughtful questions lead us into vibrant discussions.

My teaching is playful. By playful, I mean relaxed, lively, and fun. I believe students learn best when they are relaxed. Students always ask questions that haven’t been answered or are unanswerable. When they do I cannot help but shout “The struggle – I love it! Now you’re thinking!” I am struck with joy. By playful, I mean animated and zestful. I would describe my teaching as connected. I invite my students to be involved along with me and they respond. What I cannot communicate to you via the written word is my tone of voice, my expressiveness, my touch, my smile, and the way I listen to the words you speak back to me. I can do that in my classroom.