

Libby Hemphill's Philosophy of Teaching Statement

By the time one is asked to teach as a graduate student, she has spent decades in classrooms. When first entering the classroom as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI), I'd been in classrooms for 21 years, and I'd been teaching informally for many of those. I thought I was walking onto familiar turf. Instead, I discovered that my knowledge of classrooms was elementary. Learning to teach in a formal classroom reminded me what it was like to be a student in a new discipline. I'd been taking learning for granted; I'd already learned how to read for comprehension, how to ask questions to improve my understanding, and how to overcome the embarrassment of being wrong. But what I didn't know was how to develop and support these activities for a group of students who were looking to me to help them get to that point. It may sound cliché, but learning to teach in a classroom reminded me what it was like to learn how to learn. This realization prompted me to reflect on my own learning processes and to think about what worked for me when teaching informally.

One successful approach to learning is to learn through scaffolding. I find that starting with examples and providing support as students learn capitalizes on their curiosity while providing them with some structure through which to engage unfamiliar material. For instance, many days in my classroom begin with students volunteering to give short (~1 minute) summaries of the readings to be covered. These summaries are not intended to be complete or even precise. For the first couple weeks of class, I provide these summaries. I ask, "What was the author's point? What kind of evidence does she give?" Asking these two straightforward questions helps students learn that it's more important to understand the thrust of a reading than to know every one of its details and reminds students that providing evidence for one's claims is important. Discussion sections often involve very rapid discourse, and it can be intimidating to participate even when one has a firm grasp on the material. I've found that providing students the chance to summarize the readings for the class helps them overcome the initial hurdles to participation. Being prepared to summarize and speaking up at the beginning of class give students confidence. This confidence stays with them throughout discussion, allowing them to be less nervous in the face of confusion.

I like to end class by asking, "Why did we read these articles, and why in the same week?" We spend the last few minutes explicitly relating the readings to each other and to the class as a whole. By discussing the readings' connections to each other, students have another opportunity to rehearse the readings' main arguments. It also challenges students to create a higher-level framework for organizing the course material. I find that taking time for these opening summaries and closing connections provides enough structure to discussion sections that students come prepared and can know what to expect while allowing for enough flexibility that the rest of the discussion can focus on students' own questions.

I also believe it is necessary to encourage intellectual diversity. By encouraging intellectual diversity, I mean promoting variety in the ways one reasons and understands. Some diversity is built in to SI's courses by the interdisciplinary nature of our program and because students come to SI from very different backgrounds. Diversity cannot survive without nurturing, however. It is my responsibility as an instructor to foster learning environments where students are encouraged to call upon a variety of ways to view a particular situation and in which students come to value multiple perspectives. One important way I foster intellectual diversity is by encouraging students to ask, "What's another way to look at this?" even when the "this" is a claim I've made about the material.

The methods described above illustrate my conviction that classroom discussions are invaluable to learning. Formal classrooms are only one site for learning though. When working with one-on-one with a student, I focus on making material personally relevant to the student. It's important to "meet students where they live" and show them a reasonable path to where they need to go. Like scaffolding in the classroom, breaking an intimidating learning goal down into reasonable chunks can give students the confidence they need to build on their existing skills and knowledge.

My classroom is only one of many my students will enter, and I am lucky to be invited to join them. That invitation comes with the responsibility to encourage intellectual diversity and critical thinking, not just to help students understand one course's material.