

“I think, therefore I learn”: Student Learning Philosophies as Tools for Motivation, Retention and Engagement

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Student engagement is pervasively and perhaps increasingly one of the most important issues in higher education – how do we assist in motivating students into energized learners who take responsibility and control over learning and develop their own strategies outside the classroom’s walls? Ideally, engaged students are those who not only locate motivation, but take ownership of their learning process; doing so sets the stage for active learning and provides the student tools to move forward. How do we tap the source of motivation within each individual and connect with students’ passion for learning, and how do we encourage students to think about and articulate that motivation? As instructors, we have an important role to play in helping students engage; an obvious starting point is our clear communication of why the material we teach is important and relevant to the student. Indeed, although engagement can be fostered and measured in myriad ways, teachers and students alike would probably agree that people are more likely to be motivated to learn if they understand *why* they are learning. Through asking the right questions and allowing a space in students’ lives to contemplate the source and nature of their own engagement, we can harness inner motivation. The beginning of a course or a program of study is the perfect place and time for this kind of reflection, and the creation of a personal learning philosophy statement is an excellent exercise for students to explore their motivation and engagement. Common sense seems to dictate that committing to a course of action in writing – hence publicly – creates positive pressure to follow through with that commitment. Once students have articulated their learning philosophy, they can use it not only as a starting point, but can apply that philosophy throughout the course and turn to it in the more challenging moments of learning. As the first assignment in a course, the learning philosophy provides a rich opportunity to capture students’ minds and hearts.

The Teaching Philosophy and the Learning Philosophy

The inspiration for the kind of learning philosophy laid out in this paper came from the processes that are part of creating a teaching philosophy. The teaching philosophy statement has long been a standard medium through which instructors have discovered, refined, and expressed their unique approaches to teaching, and is at the heart of most faculty member’s teaching dossiers. Indeed, the crafting of a candid and unique philosophy is one of the most challenging elements of the dossier, and one over which teachers usually linger and even agonize. The crafting of the philosophy forces the writer to think broadly and deeply about both the how and the why of how he or she teaches. Translated into student terms, a learning philosophy asks writers to pursue the same process, focussing on learning goals, learning styles, trajectory of a course of study, articulation of personal learning challenges, habits and characteristics, as well as fostering an awareness of motivation factors and hindrances. As teachers think about mentors and important “teaching moments,” so students can ponder significant “learning

moments” and consider those who have influenced them. The teacher-student relationship and the roles of each are also brought into sharper focus through thoughtful reflection and writing.

Using the creation of a personal learning philosophy statement as a first or early assignment in a course has tangible benefits. It creates an ice-breaker between student and instructor, as the student discloses his or her own learning styles and behaviours (through VARK or other means) to a teacher who is trying to get to know students. Because it requires no prior subject matter knowledge, the philosophy can be assigned early in the course, allowing the instructor to get a sense of a student’s writing style, cognitive abilities, and learning challenges. We often struggle to get a course going and to encourage students to work hard from the first day of class, and the learning philosophy provides an early assignment that gets students into good work habits from the start. A learning philosophy statement is also difficult to plagiarize, partly because it is so personal, but also because the leading questions can be tailored to particular course goals and objectives. Because it is a personal statement as opposed to a display of subject mastery, students can start the term on firm ground and with positive feedback. It can also be a way to encourage students to look at the big picture of their educational trajectory and where the particular course fits.

Guiding questions for formulating a teaching philosophy statement address some more practical but also theoretical aspects of how and why a teacher teaches. Guiding questions written by Eileen Herteis for the Gwenna Moss Teaching Centre site at the University of Saskatchewan give a good overview of the kinds of questions helpful in creating a teaching philosophy. Books on creating a teaching portfolio are also good places to mine appropriate questions that can be adapted to the student experience of learning. See Appendix 1 for the Herteis Guiding Questions and my adaptations for student learning.¹

In implementing a learning philosophy assignment into a foundation course in music, engaging with students at the very beginning of a four-year degree program proved instrumental in getting students motivated and thoughtful about their learning, and brought out some key characteristics that link directly to personal motivation. The process also makes students mindful, drawing their attention away from unexamined patterns of behavior and asking them to focus on the present moment and on the foundations of their learning strategies.²The following excerpts are taken, with permission, from student philosophies (names have been changed).

Process and Inner Drives

“I am still debating the question, “Do I learn to live, or live to learn?” On the one hand, my fascination with the world of music is endless and its voice is stronger than any other voice in my life. I’m not sure if this is a healthy way to view life and learning but it is my way this point in my life. Perhaps living each new day hoping to learn what life brings that day would make me a less driven person. I am very goal orientated and I despise defeat or mediocre performance in any area. I know that balancing my

¹ <http://www.usask.ca/gmcte/drupal/?q=node/188>. Accessed January 31, 2010. Also see Peter Seldin, *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*. (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and Carol O’Neil and Alan Wright, *Recording Teaching Accomplishment: A Dalhousie Guide to the Teaching Dossier*, 5th ed. (Halifax, NS: Office of Instructional Development and Technology, 2001).

² For more on mindfulness, see the social psychology work of Ellen Langer, particularly *Mindfulness* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1989).

workload so that I do not come to the point that I hate what I'm doing, because it has consumed my life. I hope that my love for music is going to help me through my degree."

-Amanda

Changes in attitudes

"My approach to learning has always taken place in a somewhat traditional manner – especially when it comes to what I am learning about; which subjects I place value on, etc. Recently it has turned to more in-depth studies, requiring greater thought, and answers which you can't just find in a textbook. I am beginning to find the people around me an invaluable source of information, be it factual or completely personal. Music, I find, is one of those studies, that (especially in practical playing), forces one to look deeper inside what they're learning."

-Emily

Critical thinking and reflection

"My learning philosophy is made up of many experiences, and countless acquaintances, and therefore my words can only provide a shadow of its true form. I know that I try to be genuine in everything I do, and only pursue the things in life that I am passionate about. I always love remembering the quote "know thyself" from Socrates – it sums up quite nicely (in an abstract way), what part of our learning philosophy should be, and perhaps the best way to know exactly what our learning philosophy is. That each study should be full of personal reflection and discovery; whether it is music we are studying, or any other discipline."

-Carrie

Strategies and Behaviours

"My learning philosophy is based on certain key points that ensure I completely understand the teachings that I receive. One key point is *listening*; listening to the teacher, to other students and to class discussions. Although listening to a teacher's lecture is great, I also try and listen to the outside world. I listen for any comments I receive or hear from other people to not only better understand, but to reinforce my strengths and strengthen my weaknesses."

-Jonathan

Passion and Transformation

"As of now, am I am not quite sure what the purpose to all this learning is. I do know, that there is a greater purpose to it, and I am excited to discover what those purposes may be. For the time being, I know it is my responsibility to learn as much as I can in the time that I have here at Mount Allison, and to emerge on that stage in four years not only with an education, but also as a better, wiser version of my current self."

-Sarah

Learning as multi-faceted

"Something I like about university already is that I am being forced to learn about so much more than just what is taught in my classes. I love learning because there are so many different types. I could not name them all, but there is learning about interpersonal relationships, and learning responsibility, and learning time-management, and learning how to present one's self appropriately. I think university was a good choice for me because it is such a huge learning opportunity."

-Hannah

Ownership

“It is a common belief that people go to university to "get an education". Learning, however, isn't something that we ever finish. Whether through school, extra-curricular activities or general discussion, it is something that we continue for our entire lives. I am not here in university to get an education; it is not even something that can be acquired. I am here to build an education.”

-Ellen

These excerpts from student learning philosophy statements read like glimpses into ideal students, and yet they were taken from students with all levels of ability and achievement in the course. Most instructors would be delighted to imagine that students end their courses or university life with these attitudes and this level of awareness; to be able to articulate and engender them in the first weeks of study is astonishing.

The learning philosophy could, then, profitably be employed at the beginning of an individual course, but also would be quite useful at the beginning of a program of study as part of the advising process. Students needing extra support or encouragement in their studies could find the creation of a learning philosophy an illuminating look at their own learning styles and challenges. A learning philosophy could even be revisited and revised in each year of study, allowing students to document their own progress and changing approach to their work. In order to make the creation of a philosophy a meaningful and important assignment, it should be equal in weight to similar assignments in a course, and ideally would be one or two double-spaced pages in length. Grading the philosophy raises some interesting questions: as a reflection of a student's inner life, the content of the philosophy would seem something difficult to grade. At the same time, the instructor would want to indicate to the student how well or completely the writer had communicated that philosophy. A pass/fail system would be an appropriate grading strategy for the philosophy, then, to avoid the impression that the instructor is disapproving or somehow censuring students' descriptions of themselves. Alternatively, if letter grades are required, a simple rubric focusing on level of engagement, clarity of prose or expression, seriousness or care in preparation, or evidence of reflective thought could be used. The value that accrues from a learning philosophy assignment far outweighs any sensitivity surrounding grading, however. If students, as the above examples seem to demonstrate, can connect maturely with their own motivation in the first few weeks of post-secondary education, the path ahead of them promises to be a more enlightened and engaging one.

Abstract:

We teach in an era in which student engagement and retention are key components of our classroom strategies and attitudes, and we now understand that issues involving transitioning into adulthood and lack of engagement are pressing student problems. This paper investigates the creation of a learning philosophy as a motivational and focusing tool, particularly for first-year students. Modeled on guidelines used to develop a teaching philosophy statement, the student Learning Philosophy asks students to go through the same process of self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-actualization as we do as teachers while crafting our teaching philosophy. Asking students the important questions “who cares?” or “why am I here?” before they ask us these questions puts the drive and focus back to the student's inner life, the only place where true motivation and engagement can take place.

Appendix I:

Statement of Teaching Philosophy: Some Guiding Questions

1. Why are you compiling a portfolio?

2. What excites you about your discipline?
3. How do you motivate students? Colleagues?
4. Do you have a role model?
5. Has your approach to teaching, changed? How? Why?
6. What kinds of activities take place in your classroom?
7. Why have you chosen these activities?
8. What role(s) do students play in your classroom or lab: Listeners? Co-discoverers? Peer teachers?
9. Which aspects of your work do you enjoy most? Why?
10. How do you give students feedback?
11. How do you measure learning outcomes?
12. Which courses do you enjoy teaching? Why?
13. What have you learned about yourself as a teacher? How?
14. How do you encourage students and teaching partners to connect with you?
15. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your teaching and other interactions with students?
16. What have you learned from teaching? About teaching?
17. How have you disseminated that learning?
18. How has your research influenced your teaching? Your teaching influenced your research?
19. Is there a teaching or learning incident that has been pivotal in your career? What? Why?
20. What are your teaching goals?

These questions can easily be adapted to a learner's perspective and inspire the same kinds of thinking:

1. What excites you about the discipline of ____?
2. How do you motivate yourself to learn?
3. What have you learned from your peers or fellow students?
4. Do you have a role model? Are you a role model for others?
5. How has your approach to your own learning changed? How? Why?
6. Has technology affected the way you learn? How?
7. What kind of techniques and activities do you use to study?
8. Why have you chosen those methods of study or those approaches to homework?
9. What role do teachers and other students play in your learning?
10. What aspect of learning do you enjoy most? Why?
11. Which courses do you enjoy taking? Why?
12. What have you learned about yourself as a student? How?
13. Do you encourage professors to connect with you?
14. How have extra-curricular or work experiences influenced your learning?
15. Is there a learning incident that has been pivotal in your life? What? Why?
16. What are your learning goals or objectives?
17. How do you measure your own learning outcomes?