

## My Philosophy of Education and Teaching

Because human survival requires, above all, the ability to think for oneself, helping students to become confident self-learners should be the single most important purpose of education. Because learning requires, above all, the ability to ask questions and seek answers, critical thinking should be at the core of the curriculum. And because language is the common denominator among all fields of inquiry and is undeniably at the center of all human experience, it should enjoy a privileged place in every classroom.

Given the prevailing American curriculum and its division into subjects, the English class provides one of the best forums for teaching the questions that matter most to students' lives; using these questions to frame and guide a course of inquiry (including the study of relevant texts) represents the most authentic and therefore meaningful way to encourage critical thought both in speech and in writing. Indeed, regardless of subject, teachers should provide their students with as many ungraded opportunities to write as possible.

A teacher must pay close attention to his language, for strange words can confuse students and undermine their learning. For the same reason, students should be encouraged to pay close attention to the languages of their teachers and fellow students alike; to notice how everyone's language is, in a deep sense, unique; to challenge or commend the wording of questions and responses; and to request clarification of unfamiliar terms, expressions, references, images, metaphors, concepts, ideas, etc.

Learning is a highly idiosyncratic process that happens differently for every student. Therefore, educators should respect and respond appropriately to individual differences and needs; language variety (i.e., dialect) is among the most essential of these differences. At the same time, education should involve teachers and students in a dynamic process of shared learning, not a one-way transmission of information from the knowing to the ignorant. When preparing a lesson, a teacher should ask himself why it matters, and to whom; when assigning work, he should provide students with its rationale and with as many options as possible. Upon completion of both lessons and assignments, a teacher should ask his students for their opinions about the value of these exercises; taking these opinions seriously is a significant way of making school relevant.

If there is a single word that summarizes the pedagogical role of both parents and teachers, it is "modeling." What's more, the quality of this modeling, both at home and in the school, would seem to be the single greatest predictor of academic achievement. I believe "modeling" expresses the essence of a teacher's work: whether it's demonstrating some grammatical feature in practice, or posing thought-provoking questions about texts, or simply being an adult example of tolerance and patience: a teacher's impossible task and goal is to be for many students the best and brightest person they have ever known; to be a model of intellectual and moral integrity.

What seems worth living for? What is "progress"? Where do words come from? Where does "knowledge" come from? What's worth knowing? How do we decide? Far from being the exclusive province of serious adults, fundamental questions like these are of natural interest to young minds, particularly when this kind of inquiry enables them to recognize the inherent complexity, ambiguity, and open-ended nature of their lives; to see behind the baseless claims, shallow promises, and deep hypocrisies of various cultural authorities; and to embrace the hopes and truths that spring from their own, authentic encounters with the world. Finally, by helping students to become confident self-learners, public education also pursues its vital mission of promoting the critical habits of mind essential to our democracy.