

# A LEARNER - CENTERED PHILOSOPHY



**Val Margarit, Ed.D.**

## **A Learner-Centered Teaching Philosophy**

My desire to become an educator was born when I learned as a young school child that my mother was illiterate. Later it was reinforced by my understanding that parents' educational and financial background does not determine whether their children achieve success in school. This personal experience inspired my lifelong dream to become an educator, propelling me to ultimately achieve degrees in sociology and education.

I am a passionate educator and believe that *all* students can achieve success. Therefore, my primary goal as an educator is to create an environment in which students from all backgrounds can achieve the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to pursue their full potential and achieve success in college, career, and life. To accomplish this goal, my teaching philosophy, a "*living document*", relies on the following principles:

1. **Acquiring information about students and using it to inform course design and pedagogy:** My word choice, course design, content, and teaching methods are influenced by my students' cultural and generational backgrounds, needs, abilities, and aspirations. Therefore, my choice of *what* and *how* to teach is influenced by these characteristics.
2. **Knowing how people learn:** Metacognition is at the heart of student success and my pedagogy. Understanding how people learn is imperative to student success. Research

shows that people are born learners, have a need for autonomy and self-determination, connect new knowledge to what they already know, learn what is relevant to them, they enjoy learning in groups, are motivated by role models, learn when they are actively engaged, monitor and reflect on their learning, and want to learn when their learning evokes an emotional involvement. Applying these science based concepts is mandatory to learning and growth.

3. **Building Rapport:** We only have one chance to make a first impression and it lasts forever. Students learn from and look up to teachers they like. To ensure I make an unforgettable impression, a week or so before the first class I email students information about the course, my background, my innovative teaching methods, skills they'll learn and how the course relates to their life and how enthusiastic and passionate I am about teaching and working with them. In this email I also introduce the concept of "first impressions" and the belief that we only have about seven seconds to make a first impression. Moreover, one of our first class icebreakers is about students introducing themselves and having a chance to practice making that first impression. Then we discuss whether how others perceive them aligns with their perception of themselves. At this time we also discuss the importance of communication, values, cultures and perceptions. It is a wonderful activity to build rapport and discuss classroom expectations, and different perspectives related to "first impressions" and connection to the real world.
4. **Respecting diverse backgrounds, talents and ways of learning:** I embrace diversity and systematically cultivate it. There are many different ways to learn and no two students learn the same way. My teaching style is designed to accommodate all types of learners from all backgrounds. For example, I use technology to help students learn and select learning activities that fit the way they learn best. I encourage students to ask questions if there is something they do not understand. Beyond that, I am mindful of other important ways I can ensure an inclusive classroom environment in which students from diverse backgrounds can excel. For instance, in addition to my educational experience, my sociology training allows me to further explain concepts such as stereotypes, ethnocentrism, global awareness, and respect for diverse perspectives. We want to ensure that together we create a safe learning environment where everyone thrives.
5. **Aligning learning objectives, assessments, and instructional activities:** My selection of my teaching methods is critical to my students' learning and to achieving learning objectives. The instructional activities I use align with the learning outcomes I want students to achieve. For example, I primarily use experiential learning activities because they allow students to become motivated to discover and construct knowledge, develop a greater appreciation for the subject matter, and retain knowledge. The skills students learn from experiential learning are directly related to their own needs and interests and therefore applicable in the real world. Here are a few examples of activities I use in my classes that students love:
  - a. **Student presentations formats:** Effective communication skills are imperative to success. Everything we accomplish results from communication. Once I go over

the characteristics of excellent communication, I use different activities for students to learn and practice the skills: debates, panel discussion, press conference, symposium, discussions, and expert teams.

- b. **Role Playing:** Students love role-playing because they get to put themselves in other people's shoes and understand different perspectives. For example, teacher vs. students, parents over discipline of children, background differences and student success, job interview vs. expectations.
  - c. **Service-Learning:** Students acquire lifelong skills by working in community service.
  - d. **Problem-Based Learning:** Students solve problems in groups.
  - e. **Informal Writing Activities:** Students learn about themselves, values, ways of thinking, biases. An example that students love is **journaling**: At the beginning of class, students write in their journals by redirecting the mind to focus intentionally on the class's goals, and at the end of the class students journal again about what they learned, new ideas, and whether they have any questions. Students have a choice whether to share their journaling experience and personal growth as part of their final project. They all do. It is an incredibly transformational experience for both myself and my students as I watch them transform right before my eyes into confident, self-determined, self-reliant, mindful and competent leaders.
  - f. **Guided Discussions:** A popular strategy for fostering critical thinking that students love is the Socratic Method, which teaches how to question, analyze and simplify. It is specifically useful when we analyze current events or have class debates and students are required to question and analyze a topic before reaching a decision or perspective. Moreover, it is a lifetime skill students need to thrive in the real world.
6. **Communicating clear and high expectations:** From my preliminary work, I know that students' expectations are shaped by their past learning experiences, cultural background, beliefs and values. So if my students' expectations are not aligned with my own, it can create confusion, resentment and poor grades. This is especially true for my international students and first-generation students, whose educational experiences may be different. I should know because I experienced this first hand as an international student myself. For example, I was required to rewrite a 15 page written assignment because, as per professors' remarks, I did it wrong. I didn't understand her expectations. I was disappointed and wanted to give up. Thankfully, I didn't and it taught me critical lessons such as asking questions, attention to detail, and persistence. Moreover, I had a conversation with my professors and asked that they write content from a diverse and inclusive perspective and take the time to explain the expectations during class time and allow students to ask questions.

I also know that my expectations about whether students can achieve success greatly influence students' performance, also known as the Pygmalion Effect. Therefore, my beliefs and expectations in my students' potential is one of the deciding factors that predict whether students succeed or not. I believe and expect that my students will achieve success.

7. **Giving prompt and often feedback:** I provide different types of feedback, summative and formative, to ensure my students know about their accomplishments and areas of improvement. I believe every student can improve with appropriate support, guidance and opportunities to learn and grow. Intelligence is not fixed so with effort and persistence we can all improve. We celebrate our successes and work on areas of improvement.
8. **Reflecting:** Teaching requires that I reflect and adapt. I am a lifelong learner. As a reflective educator practitioner, I use evidence to continually evaluate and adapt to meet the needs of each student and of my own. I love to learn and challenge myself. I am a student of neuroplasticity and continually take online courses on personal and professional growth and use websites such as *Coursera and Harvard Edx*, attend conferences, and pursue professional training to ensure I am knowledgeable of the latest education developments and learning theories in order to enhance student learning and success. I am a role model for my students and I expect nothing but the best from them and myself.

In conclusion, I believe I have a duty to my profession, to my students, and to my community. Fulfilling this duty requires that I adhere to these principles, which may change as the world changes and we learn about new learning theories and developments. Our unpredictable world needs proactive, self-directed, and confident leaders with the skills to adapt and thrive in diverse working environments. I am committed to ensuring my students will be ready to lead and solve tomorrow's problems.