

Mike Gashler's Teaching Philosophy

Effective teaching is much more than merely expressing knowledge in front of a body of students. It is influencing them such that they both absorb and retain useful knowledge. Ideally, students would always come to class with a desire to learn and an understanding of the importance of the subject, but in the real world, good teachers are those who take the time to create these necessary conditions. Students will learn little if they do not desire to learn, and they will retain even less if they do not understand why the knowledge is relevant and useful. Effective teaching, therefore, begins with motivation.

The best motivator is example. Students can discern when a teacher has a genuine passion for the subject being taught. When enthusiasm for a subject is sincere and well-founded, it will generally be contagious. Of course, teachers should also resort to using words to motivate when necessary. Any amount of lecturing is wasted if it is not properly motivated. As students gain nuggets of knowledge, a good teacher will carefully maintain the enthusiasm by helping the students to understand the value of each nugget. This is done best through the use of projects that give them hands-on experience and prove to them that they can utilize the knowledge.

To help students retain what they learn, a good teacher must reduce the knowledge into simple concepts, and must show them how it fits with the existing knowledge that they already have, so they will remember it. Being able to convey knowledge, rather than to merely express it, is not as much of an intrinsic talent as it is a reflection of the teacher's preparation. The teachers who are most-able to convey knowledge are those that have:

- recently worked with the knowledge,
- determined how to convince the students that it is worth learning,
- prepared to express it in a manner that the students will understand,
- identified how it relates to other subjects that are fresh on the students' minds, and
- prepared meaningful exercises to give the students practice using it.

When circumstances permit, teaching should be done in a bi-directional manner. I am averse to Power Point-style lectures. Ready-made presentations need not consume class time because they can be given in the form of reading assignments, lecture notes, or video lectures. Students already have access to an abundance of free information that is not tailored for their specific needs. The value of a live teacher is that he can connect with the students and deliver custom guidance to specifically help them understand the material.

Grading can be a useful motivating force when students do not respond to other approaches, but a teacher must be careful not to allow grades to replace learning as the focus of the course. The best way to ensure that grading does not dominate the spot-light is to be clear up front, and consistent about how it is done. If grading is kept simple, learning is left as the only lever that students have to manipulate.

Although research is often considered to be a separate function from teaching, these two activities have significant influence on each other. One who possesses the enthusiasm for a subject that is necessary for effective teaching must inevitably be active in working with it. This keeps the teacher's knowledge fresh, and empowers him to show students how it is actually useful. A teacher cannot compensate for a lack of knowledge by excelling at any other principle of teaching.

Ultimately, no single approach to teaching will be effective with every student, but a good teacher will care enough to find the approaches that are effective with his students specifically. I am passionate about teaching and learning, and I strive to be the kind of teacher that will go to the lengths necessary to find the methods that are effective with each of my classes.