

Teaching Philosophy

I learned how to cook from my Chinese father-in-law. He never relies on a recipe, and yet every dish he makes is an instant favorite. After shadowing him on multiple occasions in the kitchen, I realized that his cooking was guided by a few simple principles: (1) understand your ingredients; (2) visualize the end result; (3) understand the underlying processes that need to occur to reach that end result; and (4) do not be afraid to experiment as there is no one right way to cook. I have learned over time that these principles can be applied to much more in life, including teaching.

Understanding your students

Good cooking begins with understanding ingredients: their flavor, texture, color, sensitivity to heat, and how they react to other ingredients. Good teaching begins with understanding your students: their personality, strengths and weaknesses, culture, native language, reasons for taking the class, future plans, and how they will react to other ingredients in the classroom (e.g., other students, assignments).

Visualizing the end result of your teaching and understanding the underlying processes that need to occur to reach that end result

By visualizing the end result of a particular dish, a chef can begin to map out steps necessary to achieve that end result. Good teaching is driven by meaningful and practical goals. It begins by identifying what students should be able to do or know at the end of a lesson, unit, or semester. The details of how to get there are then reverse engineered. How will you know if students have successfully met the goal (i.e., how will this be assessed)? What do students need to know to achieve this goal (i.e., what sort of curriculum would best enable student success)? What support do students need as they work towards the learning outcomes (i.e., how do daily lesson plans, activities, and homework assignments provide scaffolding)?

Not being afraid to experiment as there is no one right way to teach

Renowned chefs each have their own signature dishes and style. The diversity in cuisine owes its existence to the willingness of individuals to experiment with new ingredients and new methods of cooking. The most successful teachers act in a similar fashion. As each class is different, these teachers do not employ one-size-fits-all laminated lesson plans. They understand who their learners are and they understand where their learners need to go. In light of these two foci, good teachers adapt their methodology; there is no singular right way to teach. I also learned from my Chinese father-in-law that cooking can be more than a chore, it can be an art, an opportunity for creative expression and enjoyment. Similarly, teaching need not become monotonous. Teaching is an opportunity for creativity and enjoyment for both teacher and student. No matter where teaching occurs, no matter the subject matter being taught, these principles can guide teachers throughout the entire process. Good teaching is understanding students, visualizing student success, understanding the steps to success, and it should be creative and enjoyable for both teachers and students.