

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

“Why are you here? Why did you enroll in this course? Why do you care about the environment?”

Such a simple strand of questions, yet ones that left twenty-some of us undergraduates speechless on day one of my Environmental Education course. I was in the final year of acquiring my Bachelor’s degree, and for the first time, reflecting on what made me become such a devout environmentalist ready to change the world. Hmm, it must have been the frequent nature hikes with my folks... helping out on Mrs. Schmidt’s Farm... sharing critters from my backyard pond with Mrs. Lazar and fellow second graders during “Science with Superfisky” (aka Show-N-Tell)... learning the scientific method during Ms. Wainwright’s Summer Science Camp... winning the Detroit Science Fair during Mrs. Sheeran’s seventh grade science class... being captivated by the material presented in Professor WinklerPrins’ Cultural Geography course... the list continues. Upon such reflection, it became evident that the most impactful guiding forces in my life were not the events themselves, as much as the individuals involved with those events. I am where I am (and who I am) due to the positive influence of educators—those people who not only imparted on me information and skills, but who, more importantly, helped me discover the wonder and enjoyment of acquiring such knowledge, and inspired me to identify and ignite the passions that keep propelling me forward in life.

Now, as an educator myself, I start each semester by asking my students, *“Why are you here? Why did you enroll in this course?”* Such a seemingly simple strand of questions, yet ones that initially leave the twenty-some undergraduate students sitting in front of me speechless. Having posed the same questions for years, the eventual responses are fairly predictable, and often entail the fulfillment of an academic requirement. Overwhelmingly, education is seen as a means to an end, something to check off of a list: buy milk, call mom, get a college degree. This passive approach robs from students the most essential parts of learning, and is the major impetus behind why I teach. My goal as an educator is not to manufacture an endless number of environmentalists. Rather, **I aspire to redefine how people approach education by encouraging them to appreciate learning as a worthwhile investment and meaningful process in itself.** To obtain such an aim, I awaken students from the trance of superficial learning—where articles are read and assignments completed only to get a desired grade—and employ the following teaching techniques that specifically target and increase student engagement, investment, and overall educational benefit.

Strategy A: Create an inclusive and appealing educational atmosphere.

I create a classroom environment that is relaxed yet rigorous, one that promotes comfort and respect. I play music while students saunter in, arrange seats in a semi-circle for face-to-face discussion, and posit myself amongst my students as a mediator rather than someone who plans to dominate the days’ agenda. Hands are only called upon twice when all students have taken a turn contributing, and all opinions are awarded attention. I treat my students like real people, rather than just a name on a roster or a score on an exam, taking the time to get to know their backgrounds, interests, aspirations, and what makes them tick. Such simple efforts create a comfortable learning environment that awards each individual value and an equal role in the educational process. “[Kat] expected a lot from her students which made discussion an environment I liked to be in and allowed me to learn a lot,” reported one student in a course evaluation; “Everyone felt very comfortable with Kat and had no problem speaking up,” reported another. I know that my students appreciate my classroom atmosphere not only because they say so, but because they continue to come to class, and do so with a sense of excitement, eager to see what interesting activities or intellectual mind-benders we will dive into that day.

Strategy B: Spark student excitement and interest.

When something is exciting and interesting, it is also often considered enjoyable and worth engaging in. Education is no different. If learning is exciting and interesting, students will find it enjoyable rather than mundane or painful, and it will become a welcomed activity worth engaging in. Excitement is contagious, and I use this to my advantage when teaching. If someone were to peer inside my classroom, they would see me bouncing around with endless energy, scribbling student input on the chalkboard, and speaking enthusiastically about the topic of the day. My teaching evaluations consistently show that my own fervor for course material spreads to my students, heightening their excitement for and engagement in the course, as well. “[Kat] is so on fire about the subject matter, and it rubbed off on everyone in the class,” commented one student, while another stated that, “She was incredibly enthusiastic and knowledgeable, encouraging students to actively engage with the course material.” Week after week, I watch as the number of hands waiting to offer insight increases, inattentive students begin participating openly in activities, and the line for my office hours lengthens with students eager to continue a class conversation, seek additional assistance on assignments, or get general guidance on life.

Strategy C: Maintain student engagement.

To sustain student engagement, I utilize a vivacious variety of teaching techniques that appeal to the diverse learning styles and interests of my students. I start classes with discussions about current events, like the Farm Bill or Gulf oil spill, to create meaningful linkages between course material and the real world; I introduce students to pop culture that addresses topics taught in class, like hip-hop songs about the Bhopal disaster and the Battle of Seattle; I stand atop tables and dramatically belt out excerpts from Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and my own writings; I have students convey their own definitions of abstract terms like ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’ through abstract media such as drawings and poetry; I run role plays about urban agriculture, debates on invasive species control, and summits on climate change. Through these, and other various activities, I spice up each class session

with an array of activities that not only keep my students awake and engaged, but also test their ability to understand, retain, and apply the material being learned. “[Kat] put a new spin on the way we approached a topic each week, which I appreciated” said one student evaluation, while another stated, “Discussion sections were incredibly unique and fun (...) What a rare and wonderful experience!”

Strategy D: Encourage students to think for themselves.

Through the various class exercises I employ, I encourage my students to explore, define, and convey their own opinions on course topics. I refuse to spoon feed answers or allow students to accept something ‘because it was in the book’ or ‘because Professor So-and-so said’. I strive for blank stares followed by ‘ah ha!’ realizations, and can often be heard saying ‘to each their own’ to stress the importance of individual reasoning. “Kat always encouraged us to think deeply and come up with our own ideas, opinions and solutions to topics,” commented a student of mine. I develop activities and lead discussions in ways that challenge my students to build upon their existing backgrounds, use what they learn from class, consider all angles, and develop their own educated opinions. When I mediate debates about coastal wind turbine installations, read opinion papers on population control, or sit in on small group discussions about whether or not technology will save, I hear their voices, which demonstrates that my students are turning on their brains, taking in the material, and developing and communicating their own informed perspectives. Another student reflected in a course evaluation that, “I really appreciated [Kat’s] openness and challenging us to think hard about issues and encouraging us in whatever we sided with. [Kat] created a welcoming environment and had a great balance of letting our thoughts be heard but also interjecting [her] own thoughts and knowledge. My appreciation for the material of this course has definitely been enhanced by [Kat’s] leading and teaching.”

Strategy E: Emphasize information’s applicability.

Although facts and concepts are important and I do my darnedest to drill them in deep, I also find great importance in emphasizing why my students are learning something, rather than simply emphasizing what to learn. “Kat really cared about not only that we learned the material, but that we learned how to apply what we learned into our lives,” reported a past student of mine in a course evaluation. I continuously remind students that reading an article, sitting through a lecture, or completing an assignment is not about checking the box that says ‘done’. Rather, I emphasize that these are valuable opportunities to take ‘generic’ material presented in class, tailor fit it to individual interests and future aspirations, and stitch it together with the larger educational patchwork quilt that each student is sewing. Asking a business school student how he relates to urban renewal and encouraging an engineer to consider how she directly connects to climate change encourages my students to understand how information applies to their own lives, and heightens the level of engagement amongst my students due to the personal benefits they realize can be reaped from actually learning and understanding the material.

Strategy F: Empower students.

Throughout my teaching, I make it a point to nix the typical gloom-and-doom attitude that dwells on what is wrong with the world, and instead, focus on how to tackle the issues at hand through a solutions-based approach. I stress the importance of retaining knowledge, acquiring skills, thinking positively and creatively about the future, and preparing to enter into the world as the people who will develop and deploy such solutions to ‘save the world.’ Every semester, I conclude a course by sitting my students on the floor and reading them the children’s book, Miss Rumphius, which tells the inspirational story of how one woman is able to make the world a more beautiful place. I make sure to send my students home with a sense of positivity and empowerment—reminding each individual that he/she can make the world a more beautiful place in his/her own unique way, and wish them all much luck and excitement as they continue to discover and develop the talents that will help them do so. Hugs and applause always ensue.

The teaching techniques I employ as an educator specifically target student engagement, investment, and overall educational benefit, helping students to snap out of superficial learning, and appreciate education as a meaningful and worthwhile process in itself. I want my students to take away more from the courses I teach than just homework or a grade, and they do:

“I’m a sociology major, and not very interested in hard science. Begrudgingly, I elected 201 to satisfy part of my natural science distribution, but left the course with a genuine new outlook on and consciousness about environmental matters. Kat made the class fun and invigorating, while still maintaining the formal role of an instructor.”(Student comment from Ecological Issues, 2010)

“(O)f all the classes I have taken in undergrad, this was the one that forced me to think the most. It wasn’t just your traditional banking approach to education, memorizing and regurgitating information. Because of this, I enjoyed this class more and feel as if I have actually gotten something out of it that will stay with me after my college career is over.” (Student comment from The Built Environment, 2011)

The question asked of me now is, through this teaching philosophy is, *Why do you teach?*

I teach so I can be that same source of information and inspiration for others that educators have been for me in my life—someone who not only assists individuals with the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but who simultaneously infects them with enough enthusiasm and encouragement to jumpstart them on their own journey through life. I teach in order to help people realize their power and potential, and convey to others that everyone has the ability to create positive change in his/her own unique way.

Simply stated: **my philosophy on teaching is not about filling the minds of others, but rather, is focused on opening them to the possibilities that exist within the world and within each of us.** As a devout environmentalist still ready to change the world, I choose to teach because I believe the most significant impact is made through education, and am doing so, one lesson plan and one student at a time.