

Philosophy of Education

My maternal ancestors immigrated to the United States from Hungary, and they raised their children through the Great Depression. My paternal ancestors fled from religious persecution and raised their children on farms. Both my parents grew up alongside chickens, and they both self-funded their college educations over the course of more than seven years. I went to a Title-I school, and I saw firsthand the difference that a high school diploma and a college degree can make. From my family's experience and my own, I have seen the opportunities that education unlocks and the quality of life it produces. It is my goal to use education to empower and inspire my students, particularly those in low-income communities. This, to me, is the two-fold purpose of education: to give children their best chance to accomplish their ambitions, and to expand what those ambitions are.

In order to give students their best chance, education must be skills-based. I strive to prepare my students to be capable members of the 21st century, which requires skills more than memorization. These 21st century skills include critical thinking, social consciousness, interpersonal skills, healthy mental-emotional habits, constructive mindsets, technological competence, historical awareness, and literary proficiency. Students are more receptive to learning these skills when they are interested in a lesson's content, and see its importance. Consequently, my lessons are student-driven and focus on real-world application. Using a humanist approach, I function as a facilitator, and the student as a self-directed learner. I create an environment that allows students to explore complex ideas, and they participate in activities that give them freedom to exercise their creative and intellectual capacities. For instance, I favor Socratic circles, examination of primary sources, portfolios, project-based learning, World Café style discussions, and student-selected materials. With any of these techniques, students develop

21st century skills as they face challenging questions and work toward their own answers. As a teacher, it is my role to empower students by fostering the growth of these skills.

In order to inspire students, education must be transformative. I believe that today, in this country, the two greatest determiners of success—both economic and personal—are hard work, and a belief in the power of hard work. I guide my students to discover for themselves that success comes from the extent and quality of their efforts, and not from inborn, unalterable traits of intelligence, or athleticism, or what have you, or even from external circumstances. We accomplish this together through analysis of both literary and historical multimedia materials. I believe that exploring salient literature leads students to become more critically aware of power structures and societal forces, and better able to navigate them in their own lives with cultural sensitivity and problem-solving behaviors. For instance, exposing students to the dramatic and powerful stories of Frederick Douglas, Helen Keller, Florence Kelly, Jane Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Ida B. Wells, Lucy Burns, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi can bring context to students' lives, and insight to today's problems. And, as a side note, education played a critical role in every one of those activists' success. Essentially, I use historical and literary context to produce self-efficacy in my students, and to inspire them.

In terms of practical details, I implement strategies that effectively enable this style of empowering and transformative learning. Of course, every student learns differently, but I think all students learn better when curriculum is challenging, skills-based, democratic, exploratory, collaborative, and relevant. In order to create a classroom environment where such learning can occur, I involve students in the creation of classroom rules. When confronting minor disruptions, I take a discreet approach, such as redirecting the student's misplaced energy, or unobtrusively tapping on the student's desk without halting classroom activities. I also attempt

to prevent disruptions in the first place by keeping classroom activities interesting, engaging, and challenging from the moment students enter until the moment they leave. For performance measurement, I tend to focus on assessments that hold students accountable for their daily tasks, and that also accurately represent their knowledge. For instance, if students spend a day learning how to represent their ideas in a web map, then I will test their knowledge using a web map. Additionally, I balance students' individual needs with the momentum of the whole class by allowing for individual working time, and providing additional assignments to help students practice their skills. My student-driven activities often naturally differentiate for students, as students pursue their interests in their own ways. Similarly, the supports to these projects inherently encourage students' goals. Another critical classroom element is my attitude toward diversity. Diversity in the classroom often comes from life experience, epistemological background, cultural influences, and fundamental beliefs. These differences are not just positive elements in a discussion setting, but they are critical to the success of inquiry-based learning, as well as analysis of historical and literary texts. Finally, I see my role in the community as cooperative with parents, colleagues, and administration, because regardless of our personal philosophies, we all want the children to succeed. That's what all of this is really about.

In essence, I design my curriculum to be empowering through 21st century skills, and transformative through literary/historical context, and I carry out these goals through relevant classroom policies. In my classroom, we utilize the fascinating stories of history and literature—two interwoven records of the human experience—as a framework through which to develop 21st century skills. Ultimately, I strive to equip my students with the skillset, knowledge, and mindset to face the economic, social, and political challenges of both today and tomorrow.