April Danielle Fogleman’s Teaching Philosophy

I began graduate school with the desire to teach and do research about nutrition at the university level. That desire grew immensely throughout my graduate career thanks to many professors acting as selfless and supportive mentors. I am extremely fortunate to have been mentored in my teaching career by Dr. Sarah Ash, a professor in the department of Food, Bioprocessing & Nutrition Sciences at North Carolina State University and recipient of the Board of Governors' Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2011. Dr. Ash taught me the principles and theories of effective teaching and exposed me to diverse teaching experiences. She helped me develop my own teaching philosophy and a commitment to continuous self-evaluation, improvement, and learning.

I love teaching and am thankful for the opportunities to teach both traditional courses and distance education courses during my time as a graduate student. I especially enjoy teaching Nutrition because it encompasses several disciplines, including biochemistry, public health, psychology, medicine, and many others. The interdisciplinary nature of Nutrition attracts students with a variety of learning styles. Students of Nutrition may be attracted to the mathematics of tube feeding calculations, business aspects of food service management, or the one-on-one counseling time with patients. To facilitate learning for all types of students, I strive to create a safe learning environment, teach students how to think critically, structure the course in an organized manner, and show excitement and passion about the subject and teaching.

A classroom should be a secure place of learning and sharing ideas. I always strive to create a safe learning environment. On the first day of class I like to do an activity that helps the students get to know one another and myself. One activity I learned from a teaching workshop is to have everyone in the class draw a picture that represents them and explain it to the class. Students enjoy the activity and it creates a sense of community in the diverse classroom. The exercise helps me gain rapport with students because it helps me remember most of their pictures and names. If I expect them to listen to and respect me, I need to show them that I care about who they are. It is also important to give kind and respectful responses to students when they share ideas in class so they will feel comfortable contributing to discussion.

Critical thinking is an essential skill students need to develop in order to examine the validity of claims and discussions in their classes and life in general. I agree with Richard Paul’s definition of Critical Thinking as, “...a systematic way to form and shape one’s thinking... It is thought that is disciplined, comprehensive, based on intellectual standards, and as a result, is well-reasoned” (Paul and Elder 2001). In the past, many teachers told me to “use critical thinking skills,” but I always thought that meant to think hard about something. Dr. Ash taught me how to “use critical thinking skills.” Now I teach students
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how to write in an accurate, clear, and logical manner and to use breadth and depth when explaining their reasoning. They are required to explore opposing points of view and consider the full-complexity of issues. Now I believe every student should be taught how to think critically. Students should be taught to check their thinking using the standards of clarity, accuracy, breadth, depth, relevance, logic, and significance.

Students appreciate an organized course that gives them the tools to perform to the best of their ability. It is my responsibility to come to class prepared with a lesson plan that includes lecture notes, discussion topics, planned activities, and learning objectives. I include various activities in my lesson plans in order to accommodate diverse learning styles. For example, during one class period I may plan a lecture about fat absorption, followed by a demonstration on how bile salts work, and end with a discussion about whether or not lipase supplements will lead to weight loss. If students are confused about the actions of bile salts on fat, I spend more time explaining the subject and showing the demonstration rather than beginning the discussion.

I am motivated to come to class prepared so I can effectively teach the learning objectives, which are crucial aspects of the lesson plan. Learning objectives have the benefit of giving the students clear goals to facilitate learning. They also give the teacher clear goals for evaluating knowledge. Learning objectives need to be measurable and describe what students should be able to do with the information by the end of the lesson. I write my exams based strictly on the learning objectives. For example, if a learning objective states that the student should be able to calculate the protein need for a healthy adult, I will write an exam question asking them to calculate the protein needs for a healthy adult of a given body weight. I do not evaluate the students on information outside of the learning objectives. They should also be meaningful to the students at the present and in the future because I want my students to be interested in lifelong learning and not only basic memorization of facts. It is important to come to class prepared with a lesson plan consisting of lecture notes, discussions, activities, demonstrations, and most importantly, learning objectives and the expertise to help students learn them.

I am excited about passionate about teaching and I believe that helps to hold the students’ interest. I like to use current events to connect what we are learning with “the real world.” For example, one morning before class I heard on the news that “a diet high in trans-fats leads to depression.” I showed the news article to the class during a lecture about how to research diet-disease relationships and asked them to discuss strengths and weaknesses in reporting this study in the media. In addition to sharing current events, I increase excitement in the classroom with structured group-work, discussion,
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and questions interspersed within class time. My goal is for the students to think critically and be involved in discussion related to the subject matter. Students also appreciate when I share personal stories related to the lecture material because it makes the class more animated and relatable to real-life. For example, when teaching about the importance of eating whole fruits and vegetables rather than depending upon supplements, I share the true story about a graduate student who accidentally found that human milk has anti-carcinogenic properties. He found that alpha-lactalbumin, a protein in human milk, must be combined with oleic acid, a fatty acid in human milk, in order to have the anti-cancer effect. This example demonstrates that components in food work together to have beneficial health effects.

I believe that teachers are in a wonderful position to be able to impact another person’s life in a positive way. We should take our job seriously and guide the students by teaching them more than just the facts of the discipline. We should guide them in choosing a career that is right for them and prepare them for the real-world. If they seek out advice in areas other than the subject matter, we should show them we are happy to help. Teachers can have many qualities that make them great, each in their own way. But I believe that to truly be great, I must strive to create a safe learning environment, teach students how to think critically, structure the course in an organized manner, and show excitement and passion about the subject and teaching.

Dr. Ash impacted my life in a positive way by encouraging me and teaching me how to become an effective teacher. She helped me become a great teacher, but emphasized the importance of striving for perfection with the realization that it will never be achieved. The end result is a life-long commitment to learning and self-improvement. Not only will I continue to improve as a teacher, but I hope to make the same impact on students’ lives as Dr. Ash made on mine.