

MY PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING – FRED KIESNER January 24, 2004

The key words that are at the absolute core of my teaching philosophy are: **PASSION!!!!!! SELF-EMPOWERMENT!!!!!! BELIEF IN YOURSELF!!!!!!**

I have had a rather "checkered past." All through my early years in school I was constantly told I was a loser, a failure, and a completely stupid and worthless young man. My father beat that belief into me. Guess what? I lived up to what my teachers and elders told me when I was a kid. I fulfilled their prophecy! I was a certified loser! I proved it! I failed at everything, miserably. I had an eight-year jail sentence at age 13.

Luckily I never served a day in jail. I was paroled into the custody of a young Catholic Priest, Father Ray Morman, who believed in me. I was required to spend my High School years in a Cloistered Benedictine Monastery, studying to be a monk as a part of the deal he made for keeping me out of jail. I failed at that, also. I graduated last in my high school class.

Then on to College. I flunked out of college **twice!** (My GPA my Freshman year was 0.58 – oh the partying I did – had to make up for all that time in the Monastery) I excelled at being a failure. Society convinced me that **I was of little value**, and there wasn't a kernel of self-belief in my heart, mind, and soul that contradicted that assessment. What I didn't realize was that I was what I was making of myself – I had to take ownership for being a loser – yet I blamed my troubles and failures on others.

All this changed when I went in the army in the fifties at age 18, and met Sgt. Schue! He was the meanest, nastiest, most awful man I ever met, and he kicked my butt from dawn until dusk, seven days a week. I fantasized about revenge against him. Yet, as time passed, I began to change. I grew and I began to believe in myself; I discovered that I was not worthless, and that I had value to society. Before I left the army, I crossed the line from hating this man to "loving" him. I credit him with helping me to believe in myself and to understand my power to do good in this world.

Yes, he made a man out of me, but of more importance, he awakened my self-belief. I began to understand that I controlled my own destiny. Sgt. Schue, a barely educated, rough and tumble man who dedicated his life to helping others, kindled an understanding of my passion for life. He instilled in me the understanding of the power I have to make a positive impact on the world. He made **me** make a man of myself. That is a key difference. When Sgt. Schue got through with me, I knew I had potential in life, I charted a new course for myself, and I began to fulfill it. I went back to college, graduated in the top 10% at the University of Minnesota; went on for an MBA at Northwestern and again attained the top 10%; then went on to have a successful career in business and as an entrepreneur.

This young Catholic Priest, and rough and tough Sgt. Schue turned my life around, and I have never forgotten the impact they had on me. Father Morman died before he was forty, and Sgt. Schue died in the Vietnam War. They never knew the full impact they had on my life. I was never able to say thank you.

Perhaps partly to honor these two wonderful men, and what they did for me, I expect a great deal from my students, and put major effort into trying to get them to believe in themselves and their power. I guess saying Thank You to a priest and a soldier who died much too young for me to have the chance to say "Thank You, look what you helped make of me" is the real basic foundation of my teaching philosophy.

REACHING MY STUDENTS

I was a millionaire at 32, and flat broke at 34. In 1972 I had a massive heart attack at age 34 in the middle of a 5 month dock strike that was destroying our business. I was told I would never work again, to put my affairs in order, go on welfare, and prepare to die. I thought that was a dumb idea – I felt I still had value.

I had been teaching part-time in junior colleges about how to start your own business, and I absolutely loved it. I thought I would at least teach til I died. Hmmmmmm, hasn't happened yet! Thank God!

To a great degree my philosophy of teaching includes hitting my students over the head hard, with a big club (not physically), so they understand what their potential is in life. It works. Although I am extremely tough and demanding, I somehow have the ability to draw an extra measure of effort, thinking, and self-understanding and belief from them. During my 30 plus years here at LMU, I have had an impact on my students that is incredibly satisfying to me.

A couple of years ago, I received a letter from a former student who had graduated about ten years earlier. He started out by saying that he hated my guts when he was my student and that at the time he thought that I was the worst professor that he had ever had. Now, he was writing me to apologize for all those awful thoughts, because he now realized that I was right, about him, about life, and about learning. Let me tell you, old Sgt. Fred (yes, I made Sgt. in the army) had tears in his eyes. This type of letter is payday for a teacher whose goal in life is to instill in my students self-belief and positive achievement in life.

I am still in business! I am still an entrepreneur! My Students are my customers and products! They are also "my kids!" I teach entrepreneurship! At the same time, I am an entrepreneur - as a teacher. I create winners in life! Yes, I give them the skills of the textbook, the theory of the discipline, but I also try to give them what they need the most to become masters of their own destiny and leaders in their field of choice. I don't want to simply create Model T's in life that just putt putt along, rolling with the crowds. I want to instill in my students the understanding that they control a fine "racing machine" in themselves, with the potential to make them the leaders of the future! **I try to make them comfortable being a leader, creator, and innovator of the future!**

I teach my students about survival and achievement in life and in the world of business, and most importantly, doing it **ethically** and with **social responsibility**. The strength of my teaching extends beyond the specifics of the course content of whatever course of mine they happen to take. I teach my students to **achieve their potential** and to seek a fulfilling career of impact, not just a job and an existence. Success in teaching for me means breaking my students of the lottery mentality, that feeling that they are owed a comfortable living, without working for it. I try to push my students harder than they have ever been pushed, beyond whatever limits they previously thought they had.

Often my early years of being stupid work for me. When my kids give me dumb and meaningless excuses for their failures I tell them they can't fool me, I was dumber than they are, and I used that excuse fifty years ago, and they should either prove they are powerful, or get a whole lot better at creating dumb excuses. I have heard of "tough love", I sometimes think I inherently use that methodology without knowing all about it.

They respond! Oh, do they respond! I am sometimes in awe of how I have helped some of these kids!!!!

My job as a teacher is to stimulate the growth of **ALL** members of my classes. One of my goals in life is to give all A's to an undergraduate class. That would mean that I have achieved mastery and perfection in my teaching. This hasn't happened yet (with my undergraduate kids) – but, maybe, before I retire (in 30 or 40 years)????? Some students stumble and trip and have difficulty. That is when I go to work. I will flunk a student, but they must almost beg me to do it. When a student has trouble, it is my job to really work with them to insure that they find themselves and grow and learn. If a C- student gives me 110% effort, maximizing their abilities, I am a success as a teacher. The same holds true if an A student is just skating through my class giving only 80% effort, I then turn on the afterburner of effort. I consider myself a failure as a teacher if I cannot instill the concept that they must find what they have in themselves and give all in their power towards fulfilling their total potential. I will not let them waste their lives as I did when I was young.

Entrepreneurship, my primary field, is a state of mind and primarily a belief in yourself. **In this discipline, textbook knowledge all too often becomes rapidly obsolete.** This doesn't mean that I don't include theory, history, and factual knowledge in my classes. It does mean that I consider that my most important job is to inspire in my students the ability to gather knowledge, command it, act upon it, and make things happen. I inspire my students to think, to risk, to act on changing opportunities, pursue innovation and creativity, be future oriented, and comfortably accept their stewardship of the resources they have at their command, including their own abilities. My goal is to build responsible, ethical self-confidence in my students, and I work very hard on their attitudes, beliefs, self-awareness, and their competitive strengths. They must learn to think on their feet! They are creating the future.

Success comes to those entrepreneurs who have the inner strength and belief in themselves that compels them to do their very best, which is usually much more than what they thought they had in them. There is an on-going debate in our field - are entrepreneurs born, or can they be developed? I believe all people are born with inherent entrepreneurial ability that could be applied to any field they decide to involve themselves in. My job as a teacher is to help my students to discover their entrepreneurial spirit and ability, then to hone it into a powerful tool that will have an impact on their future.

Yet, perhaps strangely, I also teach failure. If a person does not fail sometimes, they are not stretching themselves to their full potential. What counts is what they learn from their failures. How well do they pick themselves back up and strike out into the world again with a new understanding of how the game of life works. Life is tough. We must be ready to fail, but we win if we learn from it! Whew! I can guarantee you I am an experienced teacher in this area of failure.

THE CRITICAL INGREDIENT – MOTIVATION

I have had a most exciting adventure in life as a teacher, going all over the world teaching and working with wonderful young people. While I was a Fulbright Scholar in Ireland, I was cautioned that my motivational teaching approach that focuses on excitement about learning would never work with the "more sophisticated European student." I tried it anyway. I cannot be what I am not. After several months of lecturing to 350 students in a huge lecture hall, on my last day of class my students gave me a moving standing ovation. My methods do work! I had managed to get into their minds, and motivate them, even in a massive lecture hall situation. A student representing his fellow students came to my office later with a giant signed thank you note from the students. He said, "**we love you, you teach us to think, our other professors just lecture at us.**" Yes, maybe that simple statement sums up what I try to be as a teacher! I am tough. I demand a great deal from my students and I am able to get it from them, usually. But I am always mindful that they are the ones who cause a change in themselves.

BUSINESS CAN BE FUN AND EXCITING

A teacher must capture the attention of the students. A good teacher must also be a good entertainer. You are always "on stage" with your students. Business classes can be soooooo boooooooring! I will not let that happen. I believe in storytelling as a powerful means of imparting knowledge and understanding and memory of what you learned. The entrepreneurial culture of the business world comes from learning about what has been done. A teacher then motivates students to begin to formulate their own methodology and path for what they will do and achieve. Yes, I am an entertainer, but I do not just try to keep my students entertained. I use an entertaining, exciting, sometimes even wild and unorthodox teaching style to get them listening, thinking, learning, and planning for their future. I move and touch their hearts. I keep them alert, awake and aware!

My teaching is entrepreneurial and innovative. My "school of hard knocks" entrepreneurial background, coupled with my academic training and continual research into business ventures and business people

who make the world a better place, provides me with the insights to teach in a creative and innovative manner. I suspect at times my lectures approach the fervor of a bible-belt hellfire and brimstone preacher because I believe that entrepreneurs can achieve much good for the world! I want my students to catch this excitement and fervor for entrepreneurship! I lecture in real world terms, about real world situations. I am a doer and that certainly colors my approach to teaching! I seek to combine the intellectually challenging theories of the academic world with the world of street-wise survival and action.

I strive above all to cultivate in my students a belief in their self worth, and to enhance their ability to survive and succeed in business and in life. Plus, I also give them a lot of theory and practice that will propel them into the potential to bring meaning and value to their lives and impact the world.

I teach a broad courses in entrepreneurship at both the undergraduate (senior year) and graduate levels. I have also recently developed a new class on creativity, innovation and new idea development. In addition, I still like to teach the introduction to management class, the basic introductory class. I continue to teach this class because I love to be able to work with sophomore level students. It is a lot of fun for me to be able to take a student with little or no knowledge about business, and take them to a fundamental level of comprehension of business that will prepare them well for anything they do in the future. How beautiful it is to see the power of comprehension ignite in a young student.

I spend a great deal of time working one on one with my students. Yes, I have a much too gigantic load of formal advisees. Beyond that, I put a great deal of effort into trying to help my other students outside of the classroom, outside of the formal structured advising system. Sometimes it humbles me when I realize how satisfying it is to be able to say to myself, I really helped that person.

My philosophy of teaching is based on the conviction that I will provide my students with the fundamentals in their field, and instill an understanding of their self worth, sufficient to give them the ability and self-confidence to create their own business, survive, and eventually thrive, create jobs for others, and create a career that contributes to society – again, with a keen sense of social responsibility and ethical behavior.

When I started at LMU in 1974 a senior professor rather rudely told me that what I taught, Entrepreneurship, was not a college level course, had no intellectual or academic value, and did not belong at LMU. I have tried to prove that to be an incorrect belief.

Mahatma Gandhi is reputed to have said something like "In a gentle way, each of us can shake the world." In my own way, and perhaps sometimes not quite so gently, I believe I am shaking and shaping the entrepreneurial future world of my students, for the good!

Yes, I am proud to be old Sgt. Kiesner. Father Ray Morman and old Sgt. Schue would be proud of me, I think, and I hope, because this kid that had absolutely no value in his early years is, I believe, having a powerful impact on our kids at LMU. I am trying to pass on what these two "heroes" in my life did for me!!!!