

My Teaching Philosophy

The Context: Course Offerings

I am in the somewhat unique position of being a “one-person sub-department.” For this reason, since 1998 when I became a full-time professor with an endowed chair, and in the some twelve years before that when I taught part-time, I have had to develop a large number of courses to cover the field of Archaeology and have consistently developed one or two new courses every year. In an irregular rotation I teach all of the 15-20 courses listed in our bulletin.

But the number of courses is actually greater than those listed, since with some of them, especially *ARCH 363 Archaeology and the Bible*, I do something different each year. In the case of ARCH 363, I teach a different section of the Bible each time. (This course is cross listed as *THST 398* and satisfies the upper division Theological Studies core requirement). For example, one year it was the archaeological, anthropological and theological background to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature, last academic year the period of the Conquest and the Davidic Succession narratives, and this year it is the archaeological background to notable persons: the Patriarchs, Moses, David, Isaiah, etc.

For my own growth as a teacher and to keep classes lively and new, even when I teach courses that I have taught before, I usually abandon the notes and handouts from previous times and force myself to research the material anew and try to see it from new angles. In this way I think I can convey freshness and the excitement of discovery.

My Basic Principles as a Teacher

- (1) Teaching should not be simply a matter of taking a body of material from one head and placing it in others. Something must happen to the students besides acquiring a new collection of data. Wherever possible teaching should engage and speak to the lives and concerns of the students where they are right now. This is possible even if one is teaching about ancient pots and pans or statistics. That is the challenge to the teacher: to find the links and pursue them.

I will attach to the end of this folder examples of the student work which tries to address these issues. In one instance we studied some of the Psalms and the students were challenged to explore their own lives to see if they experienced emotions and reactions similar to those suggested by the Psalms. In another course dealing with millennia-old bodies of literature, the students were asked to “sit down with an ancient author over coffee or beer” and engage the author in conversation from their own perspective.

- (2) Wherever possible, engagement with the subject matter should broaden rather than

narrow the students' life-framework, so that they see themselves situated chronologically in a history that has gone on before them, will continue, and of which they are a part; geographically so that they are enabled to break out of the ghettos of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds; and ideologically, so that they will understand that there are different ways than their own of perceiving and expressing the human experience.

In this regard I am fortunate in having put together a large collection of representative ancient artifacts, some several thousands of registered items. With my students, it is all hands-on. It is pointless to simply display these items on dusty shelves. For all of the artifacts, except for the most delicate or costly, I want the students to handle them, feel them, relate to them. I want them to know that the bowl in their hands was used by a mother to serve food five thousand years ago: relate to her, put your hands where she did, think what she was thinking.

- (3) Young people crave affirmation from the outside to know that they “are OK.” But it is important for them to explore and actualize their own potential from within and to see what many consider their liabilities as possibilities in disguise. For this they need new tools for self-awareness, self-understanding and finally self-acceptance. If it is possible within the discipline being taught, the teacher should constantly strive to open up in the students these tools. It is not enough to probe, say, the motivation of Gilgamesh (in the ancient epic) in seeking companionship. The student must be made to explore his or her own desires for or fears of bonding and relating to significant others. Even with the study of ancient artifacts: how does the student discover or invent new solutions to every day challenges? How does the student express his or her beliefs or values in symbol?, etc.
- (4) Although it is necessary to have some measurable standards for evaluating the work of the students for the sake of grading and producing transcripts, wherever possible the work of students-- whether essays, quizzes, exams, or other modalities of feedback-- should aim to be a learning experience as well as means of evaluation.
- (5) I expect students to attend every class unless there is sickness or some other unavailability. Furthermore, I expect the majority of the class to get good grades. If many students skip class or if a noticeable number of them are not doing well in quizzes and the like, the first place I look to is my teaching. Does my teaching make the students *want* to come to class? Does the way I present the matter and engage the students with it on a personal level make them *want* to study and pursue the subjects of the course?

I do not doubt that some students can be lazy, and others have questionable values that make them value social life over learning. So be it. But it is my task as a teacher to accept the challenge of motivating even these students, to present them with an experience “they can’t refuse.”

- (6) Finally, I think *appropriate* availability is extremely important as a teacher. Much of the learning process takes place quite apart from the classroom. I try to make it easy for my students to converse with me, and in a comfortable non-threatening atmosphere. I keep

long and flexible office-hours, and at the beginning of each semester I supply my students with my email address, office and home phone-numbers, and a sincere invitation to drop in or call or write any time on class material or anything else. They do so, too. Over the many years this vulnerability has never been abused and I have never regretted my decision to be available in this way.

At the same time, I firmly believe that students should be given every opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives, academic and otherwise. They should be directed toward independent research and inter-student creative activity. In light of this conviction, I have virtually turned over our burgeoning Archaeology Center to my students to administer and care for, with significant roles as decision-makers. In this capacity they have planned and overseen outreach programs for high schools, helped LMU teachers enhance their courses through use of our museums, and have held symposia on ethics and archaeology and similar topics. The last have drawn as many as 75-100 participants from LMU faculty and students as well as representatives from non-LMU institutions.

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