

Norman Scott St. Clair, PhD

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

**Audience: University of the Incarnate Word Community**

My approach to teaching at the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW) is shaped within the framework of the mission; that is, each tenet helps to focus my classes and offers a sense of who we are, who we should be, and what we should do as members of this community and graduates of this institution. Devoid of mission, as teachers here, we are simply delivering content without a true sense of how it is applicable within a broader community – locally, nationally, or globally. A sense of purpose fuels my passion for teaching at UIW, and the mission informs my intent. I encourage students to contemplate how they are a fit at this university when considering what we mean by “faith based,” in terms of seeking to understand who they are, understanding what their strengths are within the context of their own cultures and beliefs, and how their learning experience at UIW will help them to have a positive impact in the world, whatever their role. For me, this goes beyond the pursuit of a credential and helps students to connect, situate, and appreciate the uniqueness of where and who they are. The mission offers a purposeful perspective on the ethics of being a graduate of UIW, our responsibility to our community, and the commonality of our humanity.

In the classroom, I believe ownership of learning belongs to the students. My responsibility is to encourage self-direction and an understanding of the relative processes that are appropriate for the course content at hand. I am a Constructivist and believe that my role is to know my students’ needs and help foster and facilitate their development within each course. My teaching style is inspired by Piaget and Vygotski. For me, Piaget’s insights guide my thinking that it is important for students to understand theory and how it informs their ability to analyze related content. Assimilation of new information begins with reading the assigned text, but I insist that students find ancillary readings to augment what they are learning. To help students to adapt to new information based on reading theory and related content, I use reflection tools (self-dialog reflection journals) and class discussion to begin the synthesis process. Students lead discussion, present and share their interpretation/understanding, guided by my instruction and interjections when appropriate. My goal is for the students to adopt/reconcile (reframe) what they have learned with their prior assumptions about the subject matter.

As the instructor/facilitator, I rely on Vygotski’s insights on the importance of connecting students with their background and how it informs/distracts their understanding of content to challenge their assumptions. Helping students to make these connections is a critical component of learning new material, from my viewpoint. Active involvement in one’s own learning is important and, for my students, places a shared responsibility on all of us in the classroom, which I see as a learning community. This learning community fosters what Vygotski termed as the need for a social component in the learning process. My experience is that this sense of community has a positive, critical impact on the quality of students’ learning.

Finally, I situate my expectations and methodology within, what I believe to be, the reality of students’ lives and expectations as adult learners. What helps me to frame my methodology/approach/expectations on a course-by-course basis is aligned with the teachings of

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Malcolm Knowles. I believe that connecting content to/with students' life situations, develops a sense of relevance to their lives, and is a critical starting point in the classroom. I frame the course goals, but the students have a voice in how we approach these goals to ensure that the outcomes are meaningful in their lives.

While my goals are lofty, I am not always successful. I believe that I do and can improve as I gain experience in the classroom by reflecting on students' and colleagues' feedback (through formal and informal venues). I have no doubt that my philosophy and approach to teaching will evolve and be shaped over time as I reflect and learn my craft as a teacher in higher education. As a teacher, I am a learner and ever evolving, aspiring toward excellence in my field, which I owe to the university, my colleagues, and, most importantly, my students.