

Teaching Statement

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In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer makes two important assertions which reflect my educational philosophy. First, he contends that we cannot reduce good teaching to technique. Instead, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher (10). What he means is that as we come to grips with our selfhood as teachers—the forces that shape us, the values we hold, the commitments we make—we can learn techniques that reveal our personhood as teachers. Second, Palmer argues that community is at the heart of reality and thus at the heart of education (97). Education occurs within a teaching-learning community which acknowledges the interrelationship between teachers, students, and the truths we seek together.

There is little consensus in our society on the purpose of higher education. Sometimes we are asked to fulfill what seem like conflicting goals, such as social mobility and social efficiency. In my view, however, higher education is not simply some product students and society consume, a degree to use as a credential for better employment or a tool to make employees more productive and employable. Good higher education, as Parker Palmer points out, "is always more process than product" (94). Higher education is a process in which participants learn and practice the virtues and values of freedom, responsibility, community, and thinking critically about themselves and our society in a search for truth.

This view of higher education has pedagogical implications for my role as professor and for my treatment of students within and without the classroom. First, by affirming that education includes both process and product, I accept that as a teacher my function is not simply to transmit knowledge. More importantly, as a fellow seeker in the search for truth, I am a guide and facilitator in the learning process. I must respect the experiences and resources which students bring to the table and construct an environment that is conducive to learning for all of us.

Second, promoting freedom and responsibility demands that I enable students to be active participants in the learning process while I continue to improve as a teacher. To facilitate student involvement I cannot conduct my classes in an authoritarian manner. Rather, I must honor student freedom and provide them voice and say in the direction of their learning. At the same time, students must learn to exercise their freedom responsibly. Students have an obligation to us and to one another to engage the learning process, to make learning challenging and exciting. They must take responsibility for their own learning and be mindful of their obligations to others, especially their peers, in the teaching-learning community. I also have a duty to explore who I am as a teacher, and to further my knowledge about the subjects I teach and about appropriate pedagogies to teach my discipline.

Finally, the practice of community means that I must respect the rights of students to be treated fairly, to receive prompt response, and to know the basis upon which they will be evaluated. I must appreciate their differences in both learning styles and needs. In addition, members of the community must listen to and respect one another. Students must respect the diverse perspectives and opinions expressed by their peers; and they must provide opportunity for everyone to reason together in free and open dialogue in their common search for truth.

Twelve years ago, I introduced the concept of a Learning Covenant (1995) as a way of structuring the introductory course in Religious Studies (and subsequently all of my courses) that embodies Palmer's ideas and encourages the values of freedom, responsibility, and community among my students—values foundational to the tradition of covenant community which shapes my worldview (see 1999 and 2008 for recent developments). In its best communal sense, the covenant tradition recognizes the value of all persons, and seeks to generate a community that enables and requires the participation and contributions of all members. It is very difficult to promote those values in a traditional classroom which is often an authoritarian, hierarchical, model of teaching. Instead, I sought to empower students, using techniques and strategies that promoted student freedom, self-respect, collaboration, and provided ways for students to take more responsibility for their learning.

The learning covenant is an explicit, written agreement between the student, the professor, and other students concerning the involvement of the student in the class. As such, it sets down the formal requirements for the student's participation in the course. It lists the learning objectives the student will seek to achieve, the activities the student will perform to meet those objectives, the explicit criteria which will be used to evaluate the student's learning, the due dates for completion, and the weight each activity will carry (all of which can be modified throughout the semester). It has the following advantages over more traditional methods of evaluation: (1) it allows for greater individual flexibility and freedom on the part of the student to select those activities which she or he finds of most interest; (2) it states everything clearly and explicitly so that there is no confusion or ambiguity about what is expected; and (3) it allows the student an opportunity to take responsibility for his or her own learning.

In addition to the covenanting process, I structure the class on a cooperative learning model to encourage mutuality among students as they learn together. In doing this, I make a pedagogical assumption: people learn best in cooperation with one another. Individual learning may take place between the ears, but the resources one draws upon to make that learning happen come mostly from a cooperative context. Because learning is a cooperative venture, learners have the potential and the obligation to contribute to the learning of others. To promote such cooperative behavior, students and I work collaboratively during every class and a significant portion of student evaluations are based upon the collective results of group work as well as individual participation in those groups.