

2.0 STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The moment I walked into my third-year International Peacekeeping class, I could tell the three students presenting that day were nervous. The students were the Committee Chairs of the High Level Panel for the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and it was their responsibility to present the findings of their group to the class. For weeks students had been working in teams on their respective reports. Each Panel was mandated to evaluate a current UN peacekeeping mission and provide constructive recommendations. All of the teams had handed in their written reports, and the High Level Panel on the Congo was the first to present. After their 25-minute talk, a 20-minute question and answer session, and a five-minute assessment period, the three students received a loud round of applause for a comprehensive and insightful analysis. Their nerves had given way to relief and pride in a job well done.

My teaching has evolved considerably over the last 18 years. Early in my career, I gave speeches. Apparently they were good speeches, for my teaching evaluations were very strong and my teaching record contributed decisively to my appointment as a tenured Senior Instructor in 1999. What changed my practice was a series of workshops on teaching and a year long Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education program at UBC. These experiences exposed me to the body of research and practice on teaching and learning. Armed with this knowledge and inspiration, I changed my teaching philosophy (or perhaps more accurately, I developed one) and redesigned my courses and my practices.

Today, classes like the one described above are at the center of my teaching practice. The students are at the core of the learning experience, it is their research and analysis on display, and it is their peers who engage with that research and analysis. This captures the central philosophical and pedagogical theme that informs my teaching: the student is the focal point of all learning outcomes, activities, and assessment strategies. I believe that students learn by doing, and in my teaching I strive to facilitate their active participation in the questions and debates that move them. In most of my practices this engagement is a social experience, because valuable learning takes place through collective, shared effort (Braxton, et. al., 2008; Fink, 2003; Gillespie, 2001).

When I arrived at my History of War and Society class, I was very happy to see how calm the student speaker was that day. In the course, students make a short presentation on a work of art. It is one component of a learning portfolio of assignments that allows students to self-direct their learning. The art presentation is a source of anxiety for many students, but this particular student was not the least bit nervous. Only two years earlier, she had given a terrific talk as one of the eight student speakers at the UBC TEDxTerrytalks conference I help organize every year. That day, after extensive coaching from our TEDx team, she stood up in front of 300 fellow students and gave a great talk. The confidence and skill she gained from that experience was evident as she made her presentation. Afterward, she told me that after the TEDxTerrytalks, a talk to a "small group" (75 students!) was hardly intimidating.