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Philosophy of Teaching

An essay was published in *The New Republic* several years ago that turned out to be the most widely read and shared in the magazine’s history. Written by Professor William Deresiewicz (2014), the article accused some institutions of higher education of losing their moral grounding. He went on to emphasize the historic need and responsibility for colleges and universities to prepare students to not only build a résumé for their future career, but to push beyond a mere utilitarian purpose to more intentionally and sensitively guide students to address personally-relevant moral and existential questions. He challenged faculty to create curricula and learning experiences that enable students to “build a self”, i.e., to engage in soul-searching, and more purposefully develop into the kinds of human beings they aspire to become.

Over 40 years as a faculty member at USF—in which I have been privileged to engage in countless in-depth, personal discussions with 18-25 year old students—have underscored the urgency of Deresiewicz’ message. Moreover, his admonition to faculty to guide the building of selves is at the core of my own philosophy of teaching. This philosophy is internalized as more of an aspirational goal— that my purpose in the classroom will be more than merely the conduit that finds information in the literature, dresses it up in a palatable and interesting way, and then brings it to students for their perusal. Rather my aspiration is to use the privilege and authority that I have been given as a university professor to find meaningful concepts and ideas that can in some way relate to students’ lives in a personal and purposeful way, bring these notions to students, so they can use this information to improve their lives and the lives of those whom they touch, both personally and (some day) professionally.

The emphasis in this philosophy is dual. The first is on incorporating meaningful lessons in my curricula— lessons that have some personal relevance for people who are on the threshold of the arc of their adult lives. I hope I can offer classroom experiences that provide guidance, insight, and encouragement for formulating life lessons, values, and/or personal ethics that will inform students of a “right way” to live a life. The “right way” of course, is theirs to determine. However I endeavor to bring into classroom discussions provocative questions and information that will somehow penetrate, and trigger the question, “is *this* what I want for me?” or if not, “then what *is* what I want for me?”. The second emphasis in my philosophy of teaching expands these questions to “is this what I want for *my world*, the world in which I will be living?”. This part of the philosophy hopes to propel their thoughts outside of themselves and to the kinds of relationships and careers they some day hope to have.

I have taught three courses at the undergraduate level. The first, *Behavioral Health and the Family* was developed for the College of Behavioral and Community Science’s Behavioral Health major. Generally, the course is intended to address how family characteristics and interactional dynamics affect health, illness, and recovery; and vice versa— how an adverse health condition in one family member affects the functioning and interactional patterns in the entire family. In addition to Behavioral Health majors— students who, for the most part, intend to pursue a career in one of the mental health professions— students in other departments and majors periodically enroll, for instance nursing and pre-med students. Thus most of the students will one day be interfacing with others who are struggling with illness, disability, injury, or poor health. I hope what I bring to these students will somehow help them become more compassionate, caring, sensitive professional helpers— to see beyond the patients whom they will treat, to the families who are also struggling and suffering because their loved one is; and to the world beyond these families, to see for instance, how poverty, economics, and world events can impinge on the health of a community.

Another undergraduate course I teach is *Spirituality and Counseling*. This 3-credit course was originally developed for graduate students. However, I occasionally mentioned the course and its contents to the Behavioral Health undergrads, as spirituality is frequently a cornerstone of healing and maintaining good health in self and families. These students were sufficiently interested to request that I restructure the course to include undergraduates, which I most enthusiastically did, beginning in 2017. Through this course I seek to inspire students to identify and examine transcendent and existential questions and beliefs— e.g., Do miracles occur? Is there an infinite energy suffusing the universe that can be drawn upon to heal, strengthen, invigorate, when in need? etc.—that can be employed in counseling, or to awaken and impassion one’s own life.

The third undergraduate course is *Intimate Relationships.* This 3-credit course was developed for USF World, specifically the Summer Abroad program that brings USF students to Florence, Italy. Here is how the course is described in the syllabus.

*Love is the most dreamt about, written about, sung about, dramatized, and gloriously experienced relational dynamic in recorded history (and I suspect unrecorded history). In fact, intimate relationships are universal across all lands and cultures. We all want to love and be loved, support and be supported, care and be cared for by partners we hold in high regard. And yet, it isn’t easy to understand what creates close romantic bonds, what sustains them, what makes relationships struggle, and what motivates people to try once again when their intimate relationships end. Over this course, we will examine what love is, why people are attracted to one another, fall in love, eventually commit, then maintain or fail to maintain these relationships, why some partners cheat, how the bitter wounds of infidelity can heal, and what successful couples do to repair and improve their intimate relationships over time.*

Early in the course we discuss dating and courtship. To many of today’s students, these are quaint, outdated amusements. Published research (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010; Fielder et al., 2013; Garcia et al., 2012) and students’ animated in-class testimony document that nowadays we live in what is called the “hookup culture”. Many— and in some studies, most— of today’s college students engage in casual sexual relationships without any intention of a deeper or more meaningful relationship with the partner. Moreover, any semblance of intimacy is intentionally excluded from these encounters. As I taught the course, learned more about these contemporary practices and how much students participated but longed to do otherwise, Professor Deresiewicz’ message about the value of professors helping students more purposefully and intentionally navigate the sometimes rocky shoals of life echoed very powerfully.

In the next section I will more carefully describe the teaching activities in these two courses and how they attempt to operationalize this teaching philosophy.