

Teaching Philosophy

My personal teaching philosophy is based on my experience as a trainer in the corporate environment, and the teaching styles of the graduate school professors with whom I have built working relationships. These combined experiences have given me a personal teaching philosophy of helping students understand complex material, with language and examples that are more easily grasped by the layperson.

Before returning to college as a Master's degree student, I worked in the information technology business. I developed curricula and instructional manuals for office workers being trained on new software systems that they would use on the job. I also conducted the training itself. The software systems with which I worked were called "Enterprise Resource Packages," meaning that a single software product would be used by all departments in a large company.

In most cases, three parties were involved in this process. A client firm would purchase the new software in order to upgrade or modernize their operations. The actual software would be provided by the software design firm. A consulting company would then help with the transition from the old software environment to the new. I worked as a trainer, writer, and curriculum developer for the latter type of firm.

For most of the client companies embarking on this type of software implementation, the training requirements were daunting and significant, resulting in the need for training "professionals" like myself. In some cases, the workers had never before used computers on the job. For most, the new software system was considerably more complex than what was used previously. Therefore I faced the challenge of teaching very

complex technical topics to adults who were not always ready to learn material of such a high caliber.

My corporate training experience provided me with techniques for transforming complex topics into "layman's terms." For corporate students, my strategy was to use plain language whenever possible, and to succinctly relate dense topics to students' direct experiences. This was accomplished by learning about their day-to-day jobs beforehand, and then determining what aspects of their activities would change the most in their transition to the new software environment. This strategy was necessary on the job, and it has also informed my teaching philosophy.

Now as a teaching assistant in the College of Communications, my advisors (who include some of Penn State's leading Media Law scholars such as Drs. Rob Frieden, Matt Jackson, and Martin Halstuk) have encouraged me to teach a class in which students are unlikely to have experienced a more complex topic in their previous class work. I will most likely be teaching Media Law, a course for juniors and seniors that is required for journalism majors, and highly encouraged for other majors in the college.

This long-established course covers legal topics that are of interest to the working journalist, including the First Amendment, libel and slander laws, obscenity and indecency, federal and state regulations, issues with news gathering practices, shield laws, government information policy, and intellectual property. Also, because most junior- and senior-level Communications students have not yet been introduced to legal studies, this course requires an introduction to basic legal concepts, such as the workings of the court system and how laws are created.

Law is a very complex realm of knowledge (which is why practitioners must complete so many years of law school), and legal concepts are likely to seem daunting to undergraduates. Serious challenges for teaching include the dense hierarchy of laws and regulations, and the obscure Latin terms that appear throughout legal practice and literature. A further challenge in teaching this course is that the introductory material is highly generalized, but Media Law itself is a very specific field.

The opportunity to teach this course is a stroke of luck, because I can apply my corporate experience in teaching complex topics to adults. While teaching Media Law, my philosophy will be built around efforts to advance complex legal concepts and terminology in a language that my audience (higher-level undergraduate college students) can understand. The other technique I used in my corporate training – structuring the presentation of information around students' day-to-day experiences – will be more difficult with college students, who are younger and possess less practical experience than the adult office workers that I have taught in the past. Based on my observations of the professors who already teach this course, this process will entail applying the material to the future career path that has been chosen by most of the students – journalism, and in some cases advertising and public relations. (Most of the specific examples in the textbook are applied to these fields.)

Because this course is either required or highly recommended for its attendees, Media Law at Penn State has traditionally been offered as an auditorium lecture class with 150 or more students. I will be teaching a class with these characteristics. For professors who have taught the course in the last several years, the approved (by the College) teaching style has been pure lecture. This course has also been taught at Penn

State by some nationally-recognized experts in Media Law, including Drs. Clay Calvert, Bob Richards, and Martin Halstuk. There have been no open-ended classroom discussions or activities, which are not practical with such a large and densely-packed audience. The instructor will periodically ask if anyone has questions, and occasionally students will request clarification on a particular topic, but these are the only cases of student-teacher interaction. The only way to gauge student learning is multiple choice tests.

These techniques are not in total agreement with my personal teaching philosophy, though I am aware that my College enforces these techniques out of practicality and experience. Because my teaching time will consist almost entirely of lecturing, this is where I will apply my philosophy of transforming complex material into a language that students can understand. For my class I may include some low-impact Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) such as the Minute Paper or Directed Paraphrasing, for ideas on improving subsequent lectures.

References:

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