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## Reflective Statement on Teaching Experiences and Teaching Philosophy

By Don Pottorff

### Teaching Philosophy

I have always believed that teaching is a calling, and that if you enter into it only to dispense your beloved content, although that is certainly an important aspect of teaching, that you will ultimately become disillusioned and burned out. Teaching is about relationships, about experiencing growth alongside your students; learning from them as they learn from you. It is about guiding, respecting and trusting them in their educational journeys. It is about rigor and high expectations combined with compassion. Teaching is about getting to know their names and what they value, about walking beside them, (sometimes for only a semester) and sharing their celebrations and disappointments; visiting them when they are in the hospital. In medicine there is now much discussion about treating the whole patient, and today we should be having that discussion in education. Is this idealistic? It certainly is, but it has also been a guiding principle for me throughout my teaching career.

A quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson has influenced my life and journey as a teacher: "To have laughed often and much; To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; To earn the appreciation of honest critics, and endure the betrayal of false friends; To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived; This is to have succeeded." My hope is that I have touched at least a few lives, and that I have succeeded in making a difference.

Finally, at the end of a recent semester of working with perspective teachers in the COE Graduate Teaching Certification Program who tend to be idealistic themselves, I provided them the following tongue in cheek advice which reflects my teaching philosophy:

### Pottorffski's Philosophical Principles of Prattle

1. As a teacher, my curriculum is not just my textbook which was written in New York, San Francisco, or Detroit for a breed of generic, synthetic kids. A text for me is a single (often uncreative) resource.
2. Remember to use variety in your teaching. Read your professional journals and continue to try new ideas and strategies. They will keep you current and out of that deadly rut. Just like sugar, variety and fun make the medicine go down easier. Sometimes it even gets someone inspired and motivated to like the medicine.
3. Remember to relax and have fun with your teaching. Most of us need to lighten up. Congestive heart failure is really serious. Education is somewhere between congestive heart failure and hemorrhoids (in the dictionary), and is rarely fatal. Students learn at different rates and at different times (even teachers in graduate programs).
4. You can't force anyone to learn who isn't motivated. You can, however, encourage her, treat him with respect, expect her to become motivated at some point, convey that you care for him as a person, and expect that other students' rights to learn will not be violated by her.
5. Remember that in order to teach me, you need to get to know me and to accept me, warts and all. Again I like the statement that I saw somewhere recently, "rules without relationships invite rebellion" (RRR).
6. Finally, after this semester, I have adopted a new motto for students based on an old Chinese proverb. It goes like this, "There they go, I must catch them for I am their leader!"

articles and poems. He has received numerous awards during his career including the 2009 GVSU Outstanding Teaching Award, the 2001 GVSU Pew Teaching Excellence Award, and the 1999 GVSU Alumni Association Outstanding Educator Award. He has also won two outstanding teaching performance awards from the Department of Defense — one for teaching in South Korea  
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and one for teaching in the Philippines.

While Pottorff has retired from Grand Valley, he is continuing to teach in Korea. He has set up a fund to help educate underprivileged kids in Cambodia. "I was able to establish the fund with a small inheritance I received when my dad passed away," Pottorff said. ☺

## What Can We Learn from a "Drunken Pirate"?

By Rick Geisel

To read press accounts, one would think that Stacey Snyder was dismissed from her teacher preparation program at Millersville University solely because she posted a picture of herself on her Myspace site with the caption "drunken pirate" posted underneath. However, like most press accounts, there's more to the story...much more.

Perhaps Snyder began believing the hype at some point and conveniently disregarded some of the finer details of her student teaching experience because she ultimately sued her university. Among other things, Stacey argued that the university had violated her right to freedom of expression and that the court should compel the university to recommend Stacey to the State of Pennsylvania for a teaching certificate. In Snyder v. Millersville University (Dec. 2008), the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania gives us "the rest of the story," as well as some points to ponder. After a two-day trial, the court concluded that throughout her student teaching term Stacey experienced great difficulty with respect to her "competence and over-familiarity with her students." The court cited numerous examples that spelled trouble for Stacey long before her "drunken pirate" photo surfaced:

- Problems with classroom management documented by her university supervisor
- Problems with course content documented by her university supervisor
- Issues regarding appropriate communication between Stacey and her students, supervisors and cooperating teachers documented by her university supervisor
- The need to establish proper teacher-student boundaries documented by her university supervisor
- Ignorance of basic grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage as noted by her supervising teacher
- Inadequate classroom management as noted by her supervising teacher
- Poor understanding of the subjects she attempted to teach as noted by her supervising teacher
- Inappropriate manner with students as noted by her supervising teacher

If all this was not enough to put Stacey's recommendation for a teaching certificate in jeopardy, Stacey made it somewhat "easy" for the university to dismiss her from the teacher preparation program when she disregarded...

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