

# Teaching Philosophy

---

Kym Buchanan

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea. -Antoine de St. Exupery

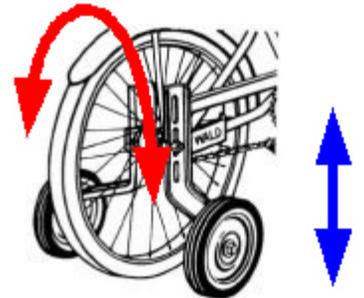
Teaching is the art of awakening the spirit. Great deeds begin with learning, and learning begins with motivation. As a university professor my fundamental goal is inspiring my students.



I try to bring passion, creativity, and a sense of humor to my classes every day. I want my students to "yearn for the sea." I want them to understand and embrace the big ideas I teach. Then they can do great things out in the world. In most of my courses, the "sea" we study is humanity: the miraculous nature of the mind and the challenges of stimulating it and helping it change. I want my students to appreciate the wonder and obstacles of this work, yet also feel knowledgeable and confident in their careers.

I try to teach for understanding by designing backwards from big ideas, including organizing principles, useful insights, and promising strategies. I teach my students to respect complexity, to use multiple perspectives and multiple cases, and to distrust simple answers.

I'm a constructivist. This means that I give my students ownership of their learning, like letting them teach parts of the class. This keeps my curriculum authentic: we talk about career skills like designing and teaching a lesson, and then they practice them. Sometimes my students stumble, but that's how I know they're striving at the edge of their abilities in the "Wobbly Place" (the Zone of Proximal Development). I know they're learning as much as they can with a minimum of "training wheels." When an education student facilitates a 15 minute lesson, they learn more than they would from a lecture five times as long. I try to use meaningful assessments, including detailed rubrics with comments, so that my students can aim for clear goals even as they wobble.



## The Trying Trio



Kym@buchanan.org | CC 2013

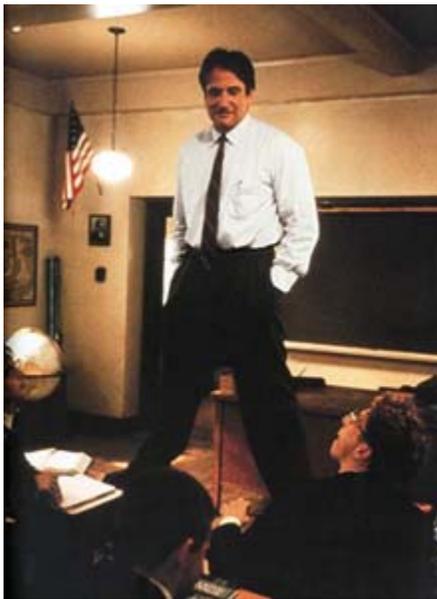
I want my students to feel courage in the face of challenge. Challenge is one way we know we're alive: when we're striving in the Wobbly Place. I encourage striving and I protect my students' freedom to fail. Admitting ignorance, taking risks, and owning mistakes are powerful catalysts in learning and creativity. I try to create a safe space to foster those "Trying Trio" behaviors. I practice an authoritative teaching style—a mix of structure and caring. The structure includes high expectations as I push my students to the edge. The caring includes trying to understand my students' lives, dreams, and anxieties. I seldom need to use traditional classroom management strategies, because my students are highly-motivated adults. Instead, I focus on teaching professionalism and collegiality. But I don't

hesitate to act if any students are interfering with their peers' opportunity to learn.

My own professional development is part of my commitment to living the Trying Trio. I recognize the worth of scientific research in understanding how students learn and develop, and I try to stay informed of new discoveries in social sciences such as psychology and sociology. My strategies for professional development include reading online articles and hardcopy books, watching informative online videos (e.g., relevant TED Talks), and attending conferences. I base on my teaching on a combination of inspiration and guidance from experts and their research, as well as my own

experiences and intuition. I use quantitative and qualitative assessment data to better understand my students' learning, including facilitating an anonymous feedback activity at the midpoint of some courses.

I understand that my students come from different backgrounds. Some are veterans and some are parents. Some are changing careers, out of necessity or to finally build their dreams. Many are trying to redefine themselves without losing their roots. They may cherish some of the values they received from their families and communities, while questioning others (e.g., about gender roles or sexuality identity). I promote inclusivity and tolerance with strategies like people-first language. I explicitly teach how to honor difference. I try to be understanding about my students' personal problems, and I readily make accommodations for issues and events like disabilities and life crises.



The most important part of my job is modeling. I try to make my teaching and design choices transparent (e.g., by explaining why I do what I do). I demonstrate an openness to feedback from my students, coupled with a commitment to life-long learning and self-improvement. I tell my education students that there are many kinds of good teachers and many paths to becoming a good teacher. I hope that some students follow my example. But I only want them to embrace the choices that make sense to them.

One way I model effective communication is how I use technology. I deeply integrate a variety of technology and media, including clickers, an interactive whiteboard, and my homemade learning management system, Kat. I created Kat so I could teach and assess in extraordinary ways, including giving my students extensive ownership of the class. I may be the most "wired" teacher my students ever encounter so I try to expand their comfort zone.

Education is the best solution to most problems, including increasing tolerance, finding or creating good jobs, and becoming better citizens of our global community and our planet. Good teaching is immeasurably important. Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." I teach to be the change I want to see.

Image Credits: Yin-Yang retrieved 13 Apr 2010 from [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin\\_yang.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin_yang.jpg) (labeled for reuse); Rainbow Flag retrieved 13 Apr 2010 from [http://3.bp.blogspot.com/\\_M5CxldbNdyk/SDJH7pr4vpl/AAAAAAAAABdU/vgq0\\_U5aktg/s400/rainbow\\_flag.png](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_M5CxldbNdyk/SDJH7pr4vpl/AAAAAAAAABdU/vgq0_U5aktg/s400/rainbow_flag.png) (labeled for reuse); Training Wheels retrieved from Microsoft PowerPoint and modified; still image from the movie Dead Poets Society