

## My Teaching Philosophy by Tara Taylor

My philosophy of teaching is part of my philosophy of life, so it is organic and constantly evolving. I am always learning new things and re-evaluating previous assumptions, so I do not have a fixed philosophy. I believe that learning has all potentialities: it can involve hard work, fun, creativity, frustration, intuition, disbelief, wonder, and those rewarding “aha” moments. Students are individuals and thus they bring unique backgrounds, assumptions, ideals, confidence levels, and aspirations to the class. Although I do not adhere to a static philosophy, there are a few important ideas that keep arising.

A deep love of learning sustains me as a researcher, and motivates me as a teacher. If there is one thing I hope to pass on to my students, it is a love of learning. There are many facets to learning, there is no one right way. I feel that I can only be an effective teacher if I can demonstrate that I am also a learner. I am open to new ideas and possibilities. Learning should be an overall positive experience. Not to say that there aren't times of difficulty and frustration (I am all too familiar with these as a researcher). Personally, my own most profound learning experiences have been precisely as a result of the difficult times. It is not always easy, and I try to share this secret with students. Often in math I see students who are embarrassed by their struggles, they are accustomed to teachers who make it look so easy- the teachers work through problems step by step, with no faltering, and they arrive at the “right” answer. So I try to show the students the struggle, that there can be different ways to do something. One way might work for one person, but not another. I especially try to encourage their critical thinking, not just the end result. To me, the “right” answer is not the point. This philosophy is present throughout my teaching, especially in how I do evaluations. I do give assignments and tests, but not as a negative tool to judge the students but as a positive tool to help them learn. I was thrilled after the very first test that I gave a student said “Wow, I really learned something doing that test”. I also try to encourage students to develop their critical thinking through communication exercises, either in the form of a paper, written questions on assignments and tests, or class presentations. I try to stress how important communication is. As a teacher, I am grateful to include communication exercises because they focus on a different set of skills, and it allows me the opportunity to see the students in a different light.

Another theme that keeps arising for me is the desire to break through barriers and stereotypes. A common experience when I tell people that I teach at a university is that they smile and say “which department?”. Then I smile and say “Math”, whereupon they stop smiling and proceed to tell me some horror story of their own math experiences. Math is beautiful! There are so many negative associations with math, and I want to help change that. I am continually learning about how diverse math is, there really is something for everyone. Students often see a very specific type of math, taught in a very specific way. Of course this won't work for every student. Thus a main goal in my teaching is to dispel the widespread math fears. As a female, I especially see the need to involve the female students. Traditionally math is studied by males. This is changing, but my own observations show me that females tend to stay in math only if they can do extremely well. An issue that I sometimes observe with female students of math is their low confidence level. I try to address this issue for them, but also for any student who believes they just can't do math. I find it extremely rewarding when a student opens themselves to the possibility that they can do it.

The strongest part of my teaching philosophy is seeing the teacher as one small part of a much larger whole. The teacher is just one aspect of the students' learning. Learning by its very nature is about change, and so I think the teacher needs to be aware of this, in being genuinely concerned about the students. They are individuals. As a teacher, I have to determine what they need. This is constantly changing, what works for one class might not work in another. So there needs to be flexibility and creativity to deal with this flux. As a teacher I try to see myself in a supportive role, as a mentor, not as someone who is sitting in judgment. However, I do have high expectations, and strive to truly challenge the students. If the students don't sense that the teacher cares about them as individuals, nothing else will matter. A sense of community is vital in the classroom, but also in a wider setting. I am open to listen to what the students say, but also what other teachers say. I am learning that it is okay to seek help, in fact it really is essential. How can students learn from me if I am not willing to learn from others? An open heart and open mind are the foundation of my teaching.