Current Philosophy of Education

Areas of Emphasis

1. Social Skills and Community

2. Curiosity and Learning Process

3. Individualized Education
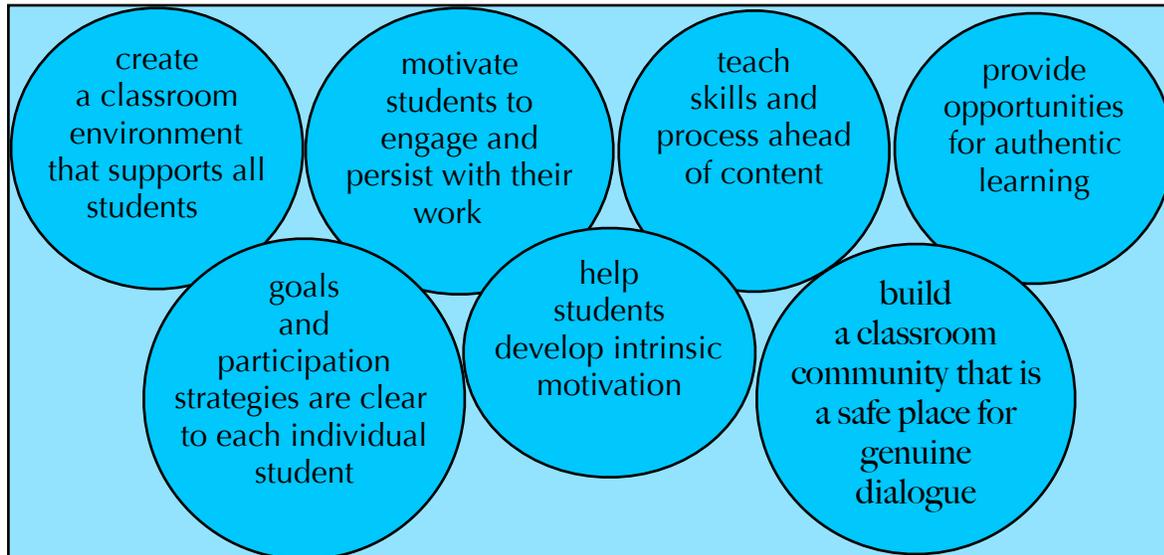
4. Technology and Teachers

Background

I bring five years of experience as an elementary teacher in California and Oregon with content knowledge to match. I have first-hand knowledge of the needs and challenges of classroom teachers.

Additionally, I have some experience in web development, having done content management work for several small businesses, including an online teacher training website for early childhood educators.

I had the fortune to work at a brand new charter school where a teaching partner and I developed an original curriculum for two years. Our focus was hands-on, project based learning, with a science and arts focus.

Content development is one of my favorite parts of teaching because it demands both creativity and my skills as a teacher. I'm skilled at finding ways to make content engaging and interactive for a wide range of abilities.

Social Skills and Community

create a classroom environment that supports all students

motivate students to engage and persist with their work

teach skills and process ahead of content

provide opportunities for authentic learning

goals and participation strategies are clear to each individual student

help students develop intrinsic motivation

build a classroom community that is a safe place for genuine dialogue

As an educator, I continue to explore ways to create a classroom community where all of these things can occur, how to help students develop intrinsic motivation, and how to address the diverse needs of our students.

According to Paulo Freire, the recipe for genuine dialogue includes: critical thinking, faith, hope, humility, and love (Freire 1972, 64). Without any one of these ingredients it will not be genuine, and will not result in true engagement and learning.

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers… Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.
> --Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

A good teacher must navigate the flow of dialogue so that in addition to the *students learning from the teacher* and the *teacher learning from the students*, the students may also learn from each other, and learn again in teaching their peers.

The student-teacher relationship is almost more relevant than the curriculum. We build our relationship through the curriculum. For example, playing colors and shapes Bingo, there's learning about both colors and shapes, but almost more importantly, there's testing and building our teacher-student relationship. I can show them that I have high expectations of their abilities when I let them take over my role as the Bingo caller. I can make the group more democratic when I let them vote on how many cards to play with...

Students and teachers must learn to have good discussions. A good discussion is the foundation for genuine dialogue. In a good discussion participants should be able to communicate their ideas, hear and respectfully respond to other peoples' thoughts, and engage on an equal level with all participants. Before we can have genuine dialogue, students and teachers must develop clear expectations for behaviors and procedures for having discussions.

I've always been told to 'expect to spend about the first six weeks of community building' and setting up norms for behavior. *Not* spending this much time up-front will mean that you spend the rest of the year constantly dealing with behavior issues and social skills. Really, a good teacher needs strategies for both preventing and intervening when students make social errors.

Having a classroom where students feel wanted, safe, listened to, and supported allows the classroom to become a brain-compatible environment, and therefore a place where students are capable of learning.

Students should have certain rights, like the right to feel safe and respected, use the bathroom when they need to, not be threatened, and be comfortable in their learning environment (Belvel 2003, 67).

Class meetings can also be a great way to create classroom community and also create a brain-compatible classroom by providing a safe space to decide how to work

Our classroom environment is a safe place. It is a place where a child feels safe to take educational risks. Put downs are not allowed and children are encouraged to use problem solving and conflict resolution (I messages) to discuss their feelings.

This is a place of mutual respect where I will help the children to understand how to demonstrate respect of themselves and others by their behavior.

I believe that children should learn to take responsibility for themselves and their learning at this time in their development. I often respond to questions with "What do you think" as I'd like for the children to begin to become more independent and to be their own problem solvers.

I believe that I should teach each individual student at their academic level as much as possible. This is differentiated instruction and may mean that your child has a different assignment than their neighbor.

I'd like for my students to enter Senior year knowing how to solve problems, express themselves, take responsibility for their actions and their education, and to know that they are important individuals with great potential. I emphasize the following very clearly to students:

"This is a mistake making place where everyone feels comfortable and safe being themselves."

together as a class (Belvel 2003, 57). Class meetings allow students to have a say in how the class functions, and allows them to make decisions about their rules, goals, and how they learn (Kagan 1994, 9:1). Meetings can be used to create these rights, and discuss how we can make sure they are enforced.

It is essential that our classroom has rules that are based on our students' right to learn. Students should understand why these rules exist and have a hand in creating them, but from time to time they may forget to abide by them. When preventative measures fail we must find ways to intervene and uphold our students' rights. Discipline should be a learning experience. It should be fair, reasoned, and explained in a way that allows the student to see why their behavior was inappropriate, and who was harmed by it. It is not blaming, sarcastic, or discouraging.

My mother uses the analogy that teaching is like "trying to keep ants in an anthill." In *Rethinking Classroom Management* they compare keeping the students in order to "trying to hold 20 or 30 ping –pong balls under the water all day long" (Belvel 2003). With this in mind, I find myself wondering how many teachers are satisfied with just "taming" or "containing" their students. The other, more appealing option I see is to creatively re-direct the kids' natural curiosity and wildness towards academic endeavors.

Strong management is important so that the learning environment is learning-friendly for all students (students' actions aren't interfering with their peers' learning, students aren't being distracted, the students are safe, and students are staying on task). Throughout the year, explicit discussion of how we learn, strategies, and *why* we have rules and procedures, can help students to engage in a more genuine learning experience. Students need to feel comfortable in the classroom in order to create a brain-compatible environment.

Kids need to be trusted with appropriately-sized responsibilities, and free to make their own decisions and mistakes, but at the same time they need a strong support system, clear guidelines for behavior as well as reasons for having these guidelines, and positive discipline that teaches them how to make wise decisions.

By thinking about inappropriate behaviors using a *social learning paradigm*, we can guide students and give them more support and positive discipline in order to teach them acceptable behaviors. Punishing students for improper social learning does not make sense. Students need to learn appropriate ways to behave in the same way that they need to learn math or reading (Belvel 2003, 27).

Cooperative learning has many advantages. To promote a community of learners, students must be able to engage and participate actively and have genuine dialogue. Students work cooperatively in heterogeneous groups and engage in learning with their peers by critiquing each other's work, tutoring, encouraging, and supporting each others learning. By working with peers students can develop self-esteem and pride for their work, and can also feel more personally responsible for their work. Having a group rely

on your knowledge can also increase motivation by establishing a situation where the student feels needed.

Each child is a unique individual, and I believe their behavior plans should reflect this. Therefore, the consequences for not meeting our expectations is usually determined for the individual student. Older children are responsible for their own behavior and are often able to solve their own problems, provided we let them.

Teaching social skills directly can lead to miraculous events, like watching a social pariah blossom into an accepted or even liked peer.

Working at my previous school, situations often demanded sturdy, research based practices that had demonstrably high measures of success. I used behavior plans, visual schedules, time timers, and social stories and other social skills lessons to meet the many different needs of my students. I learned about many sensory tools such as exercise bands on chair legs, squashy fidgets, a mini-trampoline, and a cool-down tent.

It is usually reasonably clear when you have an accessibility strategy that is working, but tracking success with notes or a system placed in a behavior plan is useful for any major desired change. A student's family might observe changes that aren't apparent in the classroom. Including the family in your instruction and goals allows you to double your impact. Maintaining good communication is important.

Reflection on a Classroom Community

My students and I enjoy class, and have created a classroom culture in which we try to stay positive and be creative. Class meeting keeps us positive and helps our students think empathetically. Creative activities help us to keep learning fun.

A major goal is to increase intrinsic motivation and take learning further. I want my class to be full of self-motivated learners who investigate things they wonder about. We cultivate this attitude with work period and lots of choice and creativity in assignments.

The most difficult thing is the need for widespread differentiation. The students who do not understand a concept could use a more individualized lesson, perhaps in a small group. Those who get it right away need self-motivation and an extension activity, but it is difficult to manage such a large range of ability. Switching for reading groups as well as math groups helps with this. I will also create leveled groups for some activities within class, both homogenous and heterogeneous. I will increase accommodations for students who need it, at either end of the spectrum.

Demonstrating high expectations for quality work is what I'm focused on right now. I want to help students to continue working on projects and assignments until they really demonstrate their learning. The goal is to create a sense of pride and a stellar portfolio.

Curiosity and Learning Process

The way we find out about the world, from a very young age, is by asking questions. We guide each other as we learn about the world. Curiosity is what drives us to communicate and learn. A good teacher watches and listens for teachable moments at all times. Students should be encouraged to ask *good* questions, and teachers should find ways to support the student in his/her quest for answers.

In some ways, curiosity, critical thinking, and questioning have become even more valuable in the wake of search engines with easy answers. Teaching the research process to today's students is very different than it used to be. The new challenge is teaching students to be be critical consumers of the information sources they find online. Additionally, students must learn how to be a responsible and valuable contributor to these information systems.

SOCRATES
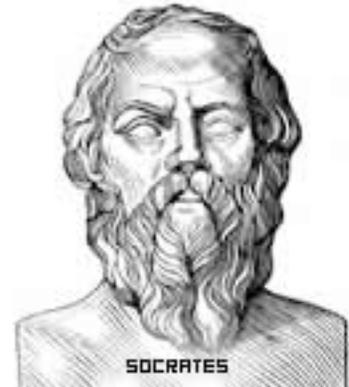
"As teachers, we should design learning tasks which are as intrinsically interesting… The problem is where we try to motivate students through points and praise without focusing on creating the most meaningful learning experience." Extrinsic motivators can actually increase intrinsic motivation by getting reluctant students involved in meaningful learning and allowing them to discover the advantages of the task. We should not rely exclusively on extrinsic motivators to keep our students functioning (Kagan 1994, 1:5, 16:9).

Talk is fine,
but the best learning happens when you
actually do the thing you're trying to learn.

As an educator, one approach I resonate with is Project Based Learning.

With Project Based Learning, students develop and acquire new skills by participating in interactive activities, hands on learning, and field trips, in order that learning will be meaningful, long-lasting, and effective.

Project-oriented programs will apply academic learning to meaningful real-life activities.

The Six A's of Project Based Learning

Authenticity
• Is the project based on a problem or question that is meaningful to the student?
Academic rigor
• Does the project cause the student to acquire and apply knowledge related to one or more disciplines or content areas?
• Does the project challenge the student to use research methods from one or more disciplines?
• Does the student develop higher-order thinking skills?
Applied learning
• Does the project require organizational skills and self-management?
• Does the project cause the student to learn and use skills such as problem-solving, communication, technology and teamwork?
Active exploration
• Does the project require the student to use various methods, media and sources to conduct an investigation?
• Is the student expected to make a presentation to explain what he or she has learned?
Adult relationships
• Does the student meet and observe an adult who has relevant expertise and experience?
Assessment
• Does the student use project criteria (that he or she helped establish) to gauge what he or she is learning?
• Is the student's work assessed regularly through methods such as exhibitions and portfolios?

Individualized Education

Students should be learning at a level that is appropriate for *them*, not their peers. It is nearly impossible to create a lesson that, straight out of the box, works for every student. Accommodations can support students by adapting tasks to fit the child's learning strategies, or to match their level of understanding. It does not make sense to give a struggling student work that is impossibly difficult or to teach content in a way that does not match the student's learning styles. Accommodations can also allow their peers at different learning stages to continue working at their own level (Belvel 2003).

> **"The most important thing is the process, not the content."**

Dialogue and communication are critical in order for the teacher to work with the students to engage effectively in their own education. Genuine dialogue can only occur if they can understand the condition in which their peers think and live. Teachers need to

know the situations that their students are coming from, and know what their students know.

An intimate understanding of our students' academic needs, background, prior knowledge, and the ways that they think, will allow us to scaffold their knowledge and reach their full potential. In a true classroom community the teacher should act as a guide, and really be a part of the learning community. Teachers and peers should recognize that every student is potential resource, and the students' knowledge should be validated and trusted! The teacher must side themselves with the students in order to be effective.

Teaching is a complex profession that requires a balanced blend of classroom skills and an understanding of interpersonal relationships. Excellence in teaching requires taking equity measures to ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve academic success.

Using Curriculum-Based-Measures to monitor student progress allows educators to track certain skills in core academic areas. Because they are quick 'probes,' they take little time to administer, and can easily demonstrate a student's progress relative to the established academic benchmarks. Helping students define their educational goals allows you and your students know when they are hitting the target.

Success is a moving target. It's important to stay constantly aware of how your teaching is/ is not successful for all students. Teaching a group is a full-brain activity, challenging us to find ways to differentiate for individual students, to find the right hook, the right modality, phrasing, motivation, or accommodations. Student outcomes should inform your approach at every level.

Technology and Teachers

Technology has been an invaluable resource in my teaching. I have used an interactive whiteboard, a document camera, a digital microscope, and an iPad regularly with students. These tools kept my lessons engaging and exciting, often allowing students to view a concept from a unique perspective.

It's become clear to me that technology moves much faster than our educational system. I've heard that there is generally a three to five year gap from the time when a useful technology is created to the time that it shows up in our schools. With this realization, I find myself shifting between lanes, hoping to find a position from which I can encourage and teach educators to embrace the incredible resources that access to technology can provide. With the rapid advances we have made in technology, I believe

that all students should be given access to new technology, be taught how to use it, and benefit from its use by their teachers.

MacGyver is ready...
Will our teachers be ready?

Most teachers already have to be a little like MacGyver in that they constantly scrape together cheap or free resources and ideas as they develop lessons. Many teachers are good at finding lesson plans, worksheets, or videos online to support their curriculum. However, in my experience, teachers don't have *time* to use technology resources to their full potential.

With our recent advances in web development, and other interactive technologies, it's easy to envision some revolutionary developments on the horizon for educators.

Many tasks have become easier if you have some technological know-how.

Moving forward, I would like to help advance our schools by sharing technology with teachers. One advantage of using technology to deliver instruction is that the modules you create can be recycled in later years. E-learning modules can be shared with a larger pool of educators. Expert-created modules can be made available to educators everywhere. With a library of known and trusted e-lessons at different levels, a teacher can spend more time tailoring their curriculum to their students' needs.

My Ideal Educational System (Which is Better Funded Than Our Current System)

Every student would have an individualized education plan and an advocate to oversee its effectiveness using progress monitoring through CBMs, and small group intervention to help students reach benchmarks.

The role of the classroom teacher would be more similar to that of a Montessori guide, and s/he would be given the time and resources needed to design hands-on learning experiences for his/her students using the standards in conjunction with constant data from the student's advocate. The classroom teacher would provide opportunities for authentic learning, help students become strong critical thinkers, and develop a supportive classroom community.

The two roles (advocate and classroom teacher) would collaborate regularly, with the advocate working part time in the classroom observing, assisting individual students, and taking note of which strategies worked for which students. The advocate would also lead small intervention groups, and assign *homework* to each student...

As with the Khan School, *homework* would be specially designed instruction rather than purely practice and projects. The advocate and students would have access to a library of research-based and validated e-learning modules *designed by educators*. The advocate would assign nightly instruction at the student's level for emerging skills and areas of deficiency (as determined by current assessments and the student's goals). These interactive modules would present information at the student's pace, allowing for practice, review, and reflection throughout the module. Information from the modules would be closely linked to their academics in the classroom.

Students' goals would be revisited during reporting phases or as needed, and would be more encompassing of all curricular areas. However, the emphasis of goals would always be on learning underlying processes and skills, and on conceptual understanding rather than on factual content knowledge.

Also, there would be water slides instead of stairs!

Bibliography

Belvel, Patricia. (2003). *Rethinking Classroom Management*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Freire, Paulo. (1972. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin, London.

Lee, Enid et. Al. (2002). Beyond *Heroes and Holidays*. Washington DC: Teaching for Change.

Kagan, Spencer. (1994). *Cooperative Learning*. San Clemente, CA: Kagan.