

Teaching Philosophy. Rebecca Anderson, Ph.D.

Pulling back from meanings – familiar and novel – and taking them apart, turning them around and upside down and inside out is a powerful skill that advances learning and grounds my teaching practice. With perspective shifts, we resolve meaning gaps and achieve new insights. As a teacher, I use strategies that invite students to continually refine their perspective-taking skills for observing and effectively negotiating the nuances and boundaries that connect, separate, and constitute them and their world. To continually refine my teaching practice, I draw from the works of four theorists from four different disciplines – Stephen Krashen, Lev Vygotsky, Vladimir Propp, and Jacques Derrida – and from classroom observation and reflection.

My practice begins with Stephen Krashen’s second-language acquisition hypothesis, which finds that affective variables can either block or enhance learning. I prioritize managing students’ learning environment to minimize the activation of feeling states detrimental to learning and to optimize those that support learning. Prompt, courteous, and empathetic responses to student communications, clear guidance, and feedback that emphasizes learning opportunities over the reverse: these strategies construct a classroom experience where the student is more likely to focus on learning rather than directing valuable cognitive resources to the regulation of their emotions.

Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach to learning and development that generated the influential Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) construct influences how I formulate clear student guidance. ZPD is the space between what a student knows and what they need to know in order to accomplish a learning task. Vygotsky calls for scaffolding of instruction to assist the student in moving through ZPD to achieve their learning objective. I am attentive to communication nuances helping me to understand the different kinds of knowledge and perspectives that students bring to their learning experience. I use these understandings to scaffold my guidance, providing students with the tools, guidance, and activities they need to learn.

Narrative’s important role in my scaffolding strategies is influenced by folklorist Vladimir Propp’s groundbreaking work exposing the universality of basic structural story elements. Stories are a universal tool for information and meaning transmission: human cognition prefers information that is organized as a story. I use stories by centering instruction around carefully constructed examples and I leverage story structures for organizing guidance.

Using theory-influenced practices for optimizing learning, I work to support students’ perspective-taking for understanding differences that philosopher, Jacques Derrida, contends don’t just characterize everything, but are everything. Meaning is not stable in Derrida’s conceptualization. In our complex and changing world, certainties and assumptions are islands of reassurance and comfort. For this reason, it’s difficult to interrogate them. This work is achieved when two conditions are met: teachers invite students to learning through respectful teaching practices, and students accept the invitation. By honing their perspective-taking skills, students advance their cognitive flexibility and consequently improve their capacity for their learning within the course and beyond.

A measure of my teaching success comes when STEM students develop novel decision-making strategies and applications for familiar technologies and either revise current capabilities or generate new ones. For literature students, what success looks like is when they progress from only identifying with characters similar to them to empathizing with those who are not. And for writing students, success occurs when they advance from arguing positions grounded in a single point of view to developing compelling and nuanced arguments exploring the validity of positions with which they disagree.

As my students gain perspective and insight, I do, too. Each course yields feedback as I observe and reflect about student communications and their learning experiences, as well as my own. These observations and reflections generate continuous advances in my perspective-taking that improve my teaching practice.