

# Philosophy of Teaching Statement<sup>†</sup>

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*“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.”*  
—Plutarch

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## How Do I Think Learning Occurs?

Learning can be defined as the process of gaining understanding that leads to the modification of attitudes and behaviors through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values, through study and experience. Learning is building bridges, where we connect the unknown with the known. An important prerequisite for learning is the recognition of the importance of the subject matter by the learner. The *depth* of learning is influenced by the type of assessment, the *amount* by the degree and type of student involvement. If learning goes beyond acquiring facts and leads to understanding it empowers us and fills us with excitement and light—it is like a fire that has been kindled inside of us.

## How Can I Facilitate This Process?

In teaching, I am not satisfied to merely fill the minds of the students with facts, but I strive to have the new knowledge, skills, insights change their thinking, attitudes and behavior. I want to truly kindle their mind’s fire.

As with natural fire that can only be kindled if certain environmental conditions are met, so it appears to be with our mind’s fire. I feel that the following conditions, which can be influenced by me as the instructor, are essential for real learning to occur—in particular for more struggling students:

- The students, as the learners, take center stage in the classroom.
- I keep in mind that I am teaching students—not mathematics!
- The students must feel that I care about them and know that I believe in their abilities, understand their struggles and want them to succeed in my class,
- The students must know that I am always willing to help them if they are willing to do their part.
- I believe that most students are capable of quality work. The reason why it is often not achieved is motivation, not capacity.

- A relaxed classroom atmosphere tends to invite students to open up and feel comfortable asking questions, cooperating with one-another, assisting classmates who are struggling and being friends rather than competitors.
- I believe in maintaining standards and feel that “curving” the grading scale of an established class often represents failure—both by the instructor and the students.
- The subject matter has to be presented in an organized, logical way so that the students can comprehend it. To help their motivation, I outline the importance of the material studied including links to other fields of learning and the world around them. In addition, I try to connect it with things they already know.
- Finally, the lectures have to be exciting and interesting to avoid dousing the flames I am trying to kindle in the students.

## What Goals Do I Have For My Students?

I want my students to leave my classes with greater ability to think analytically, competent in applying the mathematical techniques studied, not just mechanically, but with understanding.

More generally, I want to arouse in them an awareness of their immense potential and strengthen their belief that they can conquer anything that blocks their progress. In particular, I would like to help them overcome their fear of mathematics and help them realize that they will succeed, once some missing or weak foundations are laid or strengthened, and the price of practice has been paid.

Finally, I want to help the students avoid just “playing the academic game” which focuses on grades and credits and therefore usually leads to only shallow learning and gain true understanding and appreciation of mathematics.

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