

UQ Teaching Community Updates Tapping into your teaching philosophy Interview with Dr Rhonda Faragher

1.00 – When learners don't learn, it's not their fault. Rhonda speaks about her teaching philosophy as an evolving activity, and one of partnership.

2.15 – Find the theories and frameworks that resonate with you. Hear how Rhonda connected to one particular framework.

4.10 – What is the impact for learners? Hear how Rhonda translates her teaching philosophy into the classroom.

6.10 – Rhonda discusses incorporating her teaching philosophy into her academic portfolio.

8.25 – How does grounding yourself in your teaching philosophy support you in dealing with challenges? Rhonda discusses the significance of her teaching philosophy in overcoming SECaT concerns.

12.10 – Rhonda provides her top tips for enhancing your teaching philosophy.

Whether you are a teaching focused academic or have a teaching and research profile here at UQ, your academic portfolio is a crucial component for confirmation and promotion. An important piece of an exceptional academic portfolio is your teaching philosophy. So, how do you hit the nail on the head when it comes to formulating your how and why of teaching? Here to share her knowledge and experience in developing a meaningful teaching philosophy is Dr Rhonda Faragher, Deputy Head of the School of Education.

Thanks for joining me today, Rhonda.

It's a pleasure to be here.

Can you tell me a little bit about your personal teaching philosophy?

Well, mine is an evolving activity I suppose and I say activity because I think it is a verb. It is something that is a part of the work I do because I'm a teacher. It's always been part of my professional life.

When I started teaching myself, I realized that when learners didn't learn, it wasn't their fault, at least it was half my job. Once I recognized my role in that, that was a fundamental part of a shift in my teaching philosophy - a recognition that the teacher and the learner are in partnership in this great endeavour.

So when you move into a tertiary context, that's a really challenging thing. One of the first jobs I had was, quite a large group. I had over 300 students and I was teaching them mathematics, and that was a really difficult experience, to engage with the learner and try to work out where were their challenges and how could I support them. Because they needed not only to learn it for themselves, but they had to think about how to teach it to other people. So my philosophy I guess, has emerged over many years. As I said, it's a verb for me because it's an active part of what I do. It's also the part that nourishes me in the work I do.

What I've done in my written documentation is picked out particular theorists who I recognise resonate with the work that I do and the way I think about the work I do. I have in my teaching philosophy aligned with my research interests and my service interests because I see them as inextricably linked.

I recognised that my teaching and research and service, were all wrapped into a particular framework that I, when I read it I thought, "Yeah, that's me!" It's called an advocacy liberatory framework, and it's an acknowledgement that personal values underpin the work you do. And so in my teaching, because I have this deep sense that everybody without exception is entitled to learn and entitled to be in my classroom, then that has an impact on my teaching, but it also underpins my research.

Definitely I think our values do underpin the work we do, and I think for people who are perhaps new to this, tapping into what their values are and why they think their work as a teacher is important and what the impact on the learner is, will be very helpful for them.

We are who we are, and we don't put on an act. Though I do sometimes think when I'm going in to teach a large group, I do get myself in a frame of mind of thinking I am in a role... but when we are teaching, it does reflect our way of viewing the world and it reflects our way of thinking about who we're teaching.

So talking about the impact for the learners, can you give us an example or two of how your teaching philosophy translates more specifically to the classroom in some of the activities you might do with students?

Because I recognise that learners need to approach a topic in a variety of different ways it does mean that I have to try to find different approaches. It doesn't mean I'm always successful, but that's the whole point of a philosophy – that it's something to return to, to think, okay, I need to remind myself to do this. So in a lecture for example, it might be that a particular point is made through maybe watching a short video, allowing students to discuss it. Maybe private reflection. Maybe me explaining or giving a perspective, taking responses from students around the lecture theatre and then in tutorials further providing different examples. It comes down to if they are not getting it, then it's not their fault. It's at least a two way street... and that if they've not got it or they're looking confused or they're saying, "I didn't understand the assessment," first of all, I get, well why didn't you? Then I remind myself, well that's just part of what it is and, and it needs some extra explanation.

Taking the responsibility and accountability, as you've mentioned, as that role of teacher, that partnership there is really coming out to me as you're talking about your philosophy.

Yeah, I think that's a good word. It is a partnership.

So I feel like this is definitely something that's been reflected upon in your academic portfolio. Is that true?

Yes, that's true. I see central, this whole view, my philosophy permeates everything. So it permeates the work, the research I do. I can't imagine there'd be an academic at the university whose research doesn't align with what they teach. Sometimes we do get asked to take a course that's not directly in our research area, but it has to be something that we do have the research background in. So for me, my teaching and my research and my service all interweave.

I understand that you recently achieved confirmation, you were successful in confirmation, Congratulations!

Thank you. Yes.

Can you tell us a little bit about or reflect upon how you think your teaching philosophy not only contributed to your application but your success in that area?

Well actually this is one of the...I've worked at a number of universities and this is I think the only one that has asked me to actually write down my teaching philosophy. I think that was a really powerful and important process. I must say I actually enjoy reading other people's when I get to, to look and share ideas. Because everybody is different. I think while I have not been on a panel, I could imagine that this is a way that they would get a sense of who an academic is and what sort of work they like to do. Because for me it was a chance for me to say, well, this is the sort of teacher I am and this is the way I view my relationship with my students, and this is how it connects with my research and how it connects with my service.

So I found that it was a very helpful thing for me to do. It was also helpful for me in having those interviews, the performance reviews with my supervisor, because I think it helped them to get a sense of who I was, as well as a new staff member. It was a way for them to think about what sort of work I did and why I did it.

Would there be an example that you could provide of any challenges or obstacles within the classroom that you have specifically thought to yourself 'I need to go back and ground myself in my teaching philosophy here to overcome this obstacle?'

Yeah, there are a couple and one of them was a painful one. Painful to recall. I was asked to take a course that had had a history of not being well received by students and it was in its final year before we revamped it... and true to form the students didn't like it, and it was a very confronting experience and very cruel in the SECaTs. The comments were quite devastating and it took quite some time to recover from that. I think reflecting on my teaching philosophy was very important and very helpful because it reminded me of what I was trying to achieve. It also helped me to reflect on what the issues were that the students were raising. And it helped, I think, in our revamping of the course to underpin it by, while I say it's a partnership, the students don't always know what it is that we're trying to achieve.

So part of what I had to do was make that much more clear, not necessarily to say everything you want is what you're going to get because that's not always the right approach. It wasn't in that case, but what we hadn't made clear was why we were doing things. Fortunately the revamp was much more successful and the students were much more positive about it. So while it was very hard, in the end it worked out well. I think that's one of the things that I like to reassure my colleagues who go through these sorts of difficult times. Teaching is not always easy. It's one of those very challenging things. If we take that seriously, that role of reflecting through our teaching philosophy and our real empathy for our students, then we can make their experience better and it can be a general overall improvement for our teaching.

So that was one. Then there's a current one that I'm working through. I'm pretty new to working with students who don't speak English as a first language and being a monolingualist I recognise my weaknesses and limitations here. So, I have been working with my colleagues who've got expertise in that area because it comes back to my philosophy. I see it as a partnership. It's not their fault. In fact, they've got an asset that I don't have. They have another language. So really what I've got to do is look to how I can welcome and value and really use as gift, what they bring into the teaching

context. I certainly can't let it be something that gets in the way of their learning. I see it as something that I'm going to be using to develop my own teaching. That's why it's a verb. It's something that we continue to do.

I love that it gives you this really holistic perspective on not just the teaching journey but the learning journey. So one last question. Do you have any advice for other UQ academic staff to enhance their teaching philosophy and/or their academic portfolio? Maybe you have some top tips?

Well, my top tip is talk to others. Teaching is one of those things that is better in company. I would strongly encourage people to take advantage of going to the workshops and so they can hear what other people do, but also meet other people and get to hear "What do other people find interesting?" Some of the philosophy and the other theorists I have learned about are from hearing from other people, that they're the ones that underpin their practice. So then I read them and think about them. But I think it's that companionship of other academics writing this together and thinking about it. They're never the same. Everybody's different. But that, that would be my tip number one.

The second one I think is keep revising it. That it doesn't just stay as that, what you've got set there. It's something that you need to think about and keep coming back to.

Well, they're some great words of advice and wisdom. Thank you so much for sharing with us today, Rhonda.

Absolute pleasure.

Are you clear on how and why you teach? Articulating your teaching philosophy not only augments your academic portfolio, but your teaching practices. Set your statement or revise it with guidance in the 'Developing a teaching philosophy workshop.'