My Teaching Philosophy: A Letter to Students

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You’re probably reading this “philosophy” because you’ve found out that I am going to be teaching one of your classes and you want to figure out what I want and how to get a good grade. It’s a good plan; I’d probably do the same thing.

It’s my sincere hope that I can convince you that it’s better to finish your classes with a good understanding of the material, rather than just figuring out how to get an “A” and then doing a core dump before your next classes. To that end, I am flexible with respect to the ways in which we gauge your learning. While there are times when I will require you perform certain tasks, I’ll try to level the playing field and assess your understanding of the material by playing to your strengths. What I mean by this is that, if you suffer from test anxiety, you won’t be expected to base your entire grade on a midterm and a final. If you really hate writing papers, you won’t have to submit an essay several times during the semester. Instead, whenever possible, you’ll be given the opportunity to select at least some of the assignments that will make up your grade. In this way, I’m hoping to get a better picture of how much sense the material is really making to you!

You’re at an awesome point in your academic life. You’re at the point where you are beginning to truly understand what you’d like to do for the next 40 or 50 years of your working life. Your undergraduate education sets the stage for your success, whether it’s in industry or in graduate school. I encourage you to think about how much you like learning the material in your classes. If you get excited about all that you’re studying and you find yourself day dreaming about all you can do with this new-found knowledge, then you’re definitely in the right place!

I am interested especially in the use of experiments and design projects to teach problem-solving, individually and in teams. There is no doubt in my mind that theoretical knowledge is the foundation upon which creativity in engineering is based. However, bridging fundamental engineering theory with hands-on application of this knowledge helps to reinforce key concepts and provide an understanding of associated practical applications. For example, students who take materials processing laboratories with me must bake a cake and bring it to class on day one. I give the students a question about their cakes and they must then determine how best to approach the solution and then conduct a series of experiments to analyze their samples.

What my interest in hands-on projects/problems means to you is that you are likely to find yourself on at least one team project or some other group activity while in my classes. I know, I know – working in teams can sometimes be harder than doing it all yourself, but the real scoop is that you will have to work in teams when you go on to engineering practice. Take the time while you’re in school to learn how best to accomplish your tasks in groups. Learn to get along with the wide range of personalities you’ll meet in school. These are the same people you’ll work with after school; maybe not exactly those people, but that same diversity of people.
As a teacher, I believe whole-heartedly in a learner-centered environment. Now, that may make you think that the whole class is about you. Well, you’re right! And I firmly believe that you will benefit from that approach. Here’s the catch – that means that YOU are the one who is responsible for your own learning. It takes a lot of work to master engineering topics. Engineering has earned a reputation of being hard because it IS hard! So if you really like most of the topic of study and you’re sure you are meant to be an engineer, we will work together to find a way for you to understand the material you’ll study in my classes. I don’t believe in the concept of a weed-out course, so there will be no trickery or bait and switch. The material we will study in class is exactly what you’ll be assessed on in assignments.

There are two things that are non-negotiable in the classes I teach. First, all students, teaching assistants, and faculty will behave respectfully. The university environment is one that allows for pursuit of knowledge and expression of creativity; this means for everyone. Second, all students will earn their own grades; that is, everyone shall submit their own work, not that of any classmate.

So, the crux of the matter is that we will study together. I expect to learn as much from you as you will learn from me. No matter what we’re doing in class, or whether or not we’re using a book, or if we are in teams or working as individuals, it will be up to you to get as much from the course as possible. It will be up to me to make the material accessible and to try and help you figure out how it will be used in whatever job you take or future studies you may pursue.

Now that you know a little more about me as a teacher, I hope you will give me the opportunity to get to know you as a student. If we work hard throughout the semester, I’m certain it will be worth it for all of us.