Nicastro, N. H. *Teaching from both sides of the desk.* Retrieved June 30, 2006, from http://www2.nea.org/he/heta05/images/2005pg57.pdf

My philosophy of teaching! It had not occurred to me that I needed to have a formal, clearly defined philosophy of teaching. Like many new teachers, trial and error was really all that I had time for in the first couple of years—I was just happy to be 10 minutes ahead of my students. This, however, did not seem like a satisfactory response from an "award-winning teacher. "Apparently, I was doing something right. I began to think more deliberately about exactly what was driving my approach to teaching. Although I frequently sought feedback and advice about effective teaching, and I continuously monitored my own course preparations and classroom experiences for ways to improve. I have come to realize that the foundation of my philosophy of teaching developed without my awareness, when I was sitting on the other side of the desk—as a student.

At the risk of sounding immodest, after several years of teaching at a small liberal arts college, I inadvertently found myself in the position of being an award-winning teacher. Colleagues sought my advice. Students clamored to get into my courses. How had this happened? I was just minding my own business, teaching my courses as best as I could, and then—bam—I had the title of "expert" bestowed upon me.

"What is your philosophy of teaching?" colleagues would ask. From which teachers did I learn the most? Which courses were most compelling? What information can I still recall from that four-year period of my life? These are questions I ask myself as I structure my courses. They do not have easy answers. If I really concentrate, I can recall random isolated facts from various courses. I remember that carbon's atomic numbers are 666; that if you pith a frog's brain it can still swim—for a while; that Kierkegaard somehow managed to reconcile existentialism with Christianity; and that you don't mess with Medea. Obviously, these facts came from very different courses. What were the common elements that made these courses memorable?

In retrospect; it seems that I remember particular bits of information and courses because of the methods used by the professors who taught them. In some cases, the sheer enthusiasm of the professor made the material seem more interesting and more valuable, encouraging us to study harder. I remember my Introduction to Philosophy professor, who became visibly excited when lecturing on Aristotle, even at 8 a.m.! I wanted to find out what was so great about Aristotle. In other cases, the hands-on methods made the courses memorable— as hard as I may try, I can't forget witnessing the slow demise of the pithed frog.

Expectations for active participation in other courses really made the material come to life. For example, Shakespeare became much more comprehensible when each of us was assigned a character's part and we read the plays aloud. It also didn't hurt that our clever literature professor, recognizing our caffeine needs at that early hour, renamed the course "Breakfast with Shakespeare" and held class in the cafeteria.

Finally, class discussions and assignments that encouraged thoughtful analysis of the personal relevance of class material made it much easier to remember. I still remember one of my assignments from my freshman Introductory Psychology course: to apply the various theories that we had studied to our own personal development (perhaps why I became a psych major?). It is obvious to me that my retention of some of the content of my undergraduate courses can be credited to professors' enthusiasm and active teaching methods. But what about courses that I felt had changed my life? I can think of several. In retrospect, it seems that I remember particular bits of information and courses because of the methods used by the professors who taught them.

All courses seemed incredibly life altering at the time that I took them, but from which I can recall very little content. Surely they had content! How could they have been so important if I can remember so little from them? It was in those classes that I learned how to think. I learned not simply to accept information at face value, but to evaluate it and determine the degree to which it is true or useful. I learned to ask questions and to seek answers on my own, to respect the views of others and to express and support my own.

I learned that the world does not operate in black-and-white, but in shades of gray, and that what is accepted as truth today may not be so when new research findings modify or contradict it. This is a hard pill to swallow when you are 19, 20, and 21 years old. Just when you think you have it all figured out, the rules change. For this reason, I think it was also vitally important that the professors who taught those courses allowed their students to see them as more than experts in their fields of study. They allowed us to know them not only as scholars who struggled with contradictions within their disciplines, but also as human beings with families and mortgages, hobbies and habits. They allowed us to see how they reconciled the diverse areas of their lives. They inadvertently served as role models for putting all of the pieces together and   struggling with the contradictions of life outside of the classroom as well as inside.

In essence, their scholarly lives were not separate from other aspects of their lives—who they were in the classroom was who they were.   How does this translate into my philosophy of teaching? I mean, we don't pith frogs in psychology, and the cafeteria is far too crowded to be an appropriate location for a class meeting.

Nonetheless, I have taken the basic principles that seemed effective to me when I was a student and have tried to apply them as a teacher. Of course, now that I'm *on the other side of the desk*, I have some additional insights as well. I can understand the value of assignments that I had to complete that seemed pointless at the time. Armed with this reflection, I developed a philosophy of teaching that revolves around five basic principles. Although I teach psychology, I believe these principles can be applied to any discipline, as they were extracted from my experiences as a student in multiple disciplines. I learned to ask questions and to seek answers on my own, to respect the views of others and to express and support my own.

Principle #1: Be Approachable
In my experience, the first step toward inspiring students to take responsibility for their own learning is to create a positive rapport so they will come to you when they have problems or questions. This is especially important for students in their first semester of college. I remember how intimidated I was by some of my undergraduate—and even graduate—professors. I would not have dreamed of approaching them outside of class, and the thought of asking a question in class was even a little scary. I don't think they intended to be unapproachable (at least most of them). I do think that it didn't occur to them that being approachable is an important aspect of teaching.

What makes a professor seem approachable to students? I have asked this question of some of my students over the years, and I always get similar responses: *They know your name. They recognize that you have a life outside of the classroom. They don't make you feel stupid when you ask a question. They remember how it felt to be a student. They are friendly.* Some of these things may not seem like essential elements of good teaching, but the fact of the matter is that a student cannot effectively learn from someone when they are afraid to ask a question.

With all of these things in mind, I make extra efforts to be approachable, both in and out of the classroom. *First*, I try to learn all of my students' names early in the semester. I won't pretend that it's easy—there are a lot of them. I forewarn them that it will probably take me several weeks to get their names right. I also state explicitly that my success or failure at remembering their names is not an indicator of my feelings about them or their class performance — there are simply a lot of them. I ask them not to be offended if I can't remember their names, and to correct me if I call them the wrong name. How does all of this make me approachable? First, it helps me to learn their names a second time it allows them to see me making efforts—and mistakes—at "mastering the material." I do not presume that my performance on memorizing their names will be perfect, and if I'm willing to learn from my mistakes, maybe my students will too!

Sometimes approachability is proactive. If I notice a change in a student's attendance, demeanor, or performance, I will ask him or her about it. For example, I had one student who came to class every day, sat near the front, and appeared to be paying attention, participated in class activities, but then performed very poorly on the first exam. Instead of waiting for her, I approached her after class. It turned out that English was her second language, and she was having difficulty with some of the terminology on the exams. After that, she came by my office regularly to discuss questions about class material.

One of my goals in the classroom is to create an atmosphere of respect between myself and my students as well as among the students. I want them to feel comfortable expressing their views. This is not always easy. Let's face it—some times students do say things that invite ridicule from their classmates. Sometimes it is difficult even as the professor not to roll my eyes and make a snide comment .This is where remembering my own college experiences comes in handy. For some students, it takes lot courage to speak out in class at all. As the professor, I believe it is my job to acknowledge and affirm students' efforts, even if their comments are off base. The big challenge is to let them know that their responses are off base without making them feel inept. This takes practice. I usually start out with something like, "That's a really interesting point/question." Then I connect it in some tangential way to what we are studying, and then bring the focus back to the topic at hand. This method usually encourages student participation and helps them feel "safe" in approaching both me and their fellow students.

Principle #2: Use Active Learning Methods and Emphasize Relevancy
 As I discussed earlier, I learned the most in my undergraduate courses in which professors used active learning methods and made the relevance of the course material to my life clear.

Likewise, I have found that my own students benefit when I employ these methods. Why an active classroom? Can't I get the same results from lecturing? *My short answer is no*. It's not that presentations have no place in the classroom. I frequently present material in lecture format—for some information, there is simply no other way. But, whenever possible, I interrupt my presentations to ask the students questions, or to ask them to provide examples of the concepts we are discussing. Sometimes, I provide a brief overview of material and then ask students to work in groups to develop an application of it.

This transformation from "passive absorber of information" to "active constructor" promotes mastery of course material regardless of the content. First, it allows me to see whether students are aware of my goals within the classroom is to create an   atmosphere actually understanding the material rather than simply remembering it. Second, it allows the students to be more responsible for their own learning, which tends to motivate them. They are more likely to come to class having read and thought about the material, which allows us to use class

time more effectively. Finally, it keeps them from becoming bored and "shutting down," which often occurs during long presentations, even on the most fascinating topics.

Perhaps as important as using active methods is making the information personally meaningful to the students. It is easier to remember things if we can give them significance in the context of our own lives. Fortunately for me, psychology lends itself to this kind of analysis. But this might not work in all disciplines. When the course material doesn't lend itself to personal meaning or significance, emphasizing the relevance of the material to things outside of the classroom can be effective. This might be done by focusing on how course concepts relate to current events, everyday life, or issues in one's field. Seeing the practical, if not personal relevance of course material can go a long way toward motivating students.

PRINCIPLE #3: Encourage Primary Source Reading and Critical Thinking
An assignment that required primary source reading and critical thinking is often a sore spot with students. When I was a student, I hated reading primary source empirical studies in psychology. Truth be told, it is still not one of my more preferred scholarly activities. However, from this side of the desk, I understand its importance in learning to evaluate information for myself. As an educator, I believe my primary responsibility is to provide students with the skills they need to think for themselves. I don't believe that they can develop these skills simply by reading textbooks in which much of the analysis of primary sources has already been done. Critical thinking skills develop by struggling with the information that is available on a topic, evaluating its validity and reliability, and coming to one's own conclusions. Reading primary sources is one way to enhance the development of these skills. I learned the most in my undergraduate courses when professors used active learning methods and made the relevance of the course material to my life clear.

Once again, in psychology it is easy to incorporate primary source readings into the broad goal of encouraging critical thinking. I encourage students to question the research behind what they are learning. Were the methods sound? Was the sample representative? Did the researchers over generalize their conclusions? What were the limitations of the research? When students struggle with primary source readings it gives them practice with critical thinking. It also gives them a sense of competence when they can successfully understand— even though their understanding is often limited—a research report. The many controversies within the field of psychology provide numerous opportunities for critical thinking, and I am certain that this can be applied to other fields of study as well. Students can be challenged to review various perspectives on an issue, evaluate the information that supports each view, and then develop their own conclusions. The ultimate goal, of course, is to help students develop the skills necessary to support their own conclusions, based on their own analysis of the information, rather than on what their professors think or what their textbook

author says. Although students may complain about these assignments (often loudly), these skills will be both personally and practically relevant to every aspect of their lives in the future.

PRINCIPLE #4: Challenge Students both Intellectually and Personally
When I graduated from high school, I remember feeling so important and accomplished. I felt like I had all of the answers, I knew who I was and where I was going, and I had a pretty strong sense of my own attitudes and values. Then, I went away to college.

It wasn't as if I had not been exposed to diversity before college, but I did grow up in a rather homogeneous community, and my parents were pretty involved and protective. I had encountered people with different life experiences and values before attending college, but I hadn't really gotten to know them. And I certainly had not spent significant amounts of time with them. And forget about professors! Before I attended college, I think I knew maybe two people who had advanced degrees. It was a little scary being exposed to all of these new people, attitudes, ideas, and experiences. It was also exciting, and, in retrospect, critical to my own intellectual and personal development.

I discussed earlier having taken some courses that I felt had been life-altering experiences. One of those courses was *existentialism*, which exposed me to an entirely new way of thinking about the human condition. Not only did this course challenge my intellect, but this new way of thinking forced me to reevaluate my attitudes and values in its light. I was fortunate to have had a professor who encouraged personal reflection and was available for questions and discussions.

Taking this course challenged my world view and made me crave more philosophy how can I do this for my students? First, it is important to recognize that, developmentally, traditional college aged students are "ripe" for this kind of experience. In many cases, they are on their own for the first time. When they come into the classroom, they bring their own world views, shaped by years of experience in a family with a particular value system and way of understanding the world. The key here is that each of them brings slightly different world views. Being exposed to one another begins the process of intellectual and personal challenge.

In providing this intellectual challenge, I rely on a couple of basic principles. The *first* is that in the classroom we respect one another's points of view to allow for the free exchange of ideas. *Second*, I encourage students to question their own assumptions about human behavior, especially their own behavior, and to keep an open mind about the research and theories that we are studying even if they seem inconsistent with their personal experiences. Throughout the term, students realize (many for the first time) that their personal understanding of the world is not. Students can review various perspectives on an issue, evaluate the information that supports each view, and then develop their own conclusions

universal. This ideally increases their interest in the topic being studied. *Finally*, I try to structure assignments at appropriate levels of challenge for each course. With every student having different levels of preparedness, I find setting the bar high enough, but not too high, to be the biggest challenge of effective teaching (but the details of that would fill another essay entirely).

What about challenging students personally? I remember that a requirement for one of my undergraduate child psychology courses was a placement experience at a state-run home for children. Each of us was to spend time with an assigned child every week, to keep a journal of our experiences, and to draw connections between what we were seeing in our placements and what we were studying in class. Not only was this a fantastic way to bring course material to life, but I remember finding it a personal challenge as well. I was kind of shy, and it was a big deal for me to go to this place, talk to "real" grown-ups about their work, and to be exposed to a child with behavior problems. When possible, I try to include similar kinds of experiences for my students. In my child development courses, I have placed students with Head Start and with Boys and Girls Clubs of America. In my adulthood and aging courses, I have placed students with nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Students are often apprehensive when they begin these assignments. By the end of the term, however, they unanimously praise these experiences as sources of both intellectual and personal enrichment. Again, I am fortunate that psychology lends itself to these kinds of experiences. But any kind of service-learning activity can achieve the same outcomes.

PRINCIPLE #5: Teach From Who You Are
This, for me, is the proverbial bottom line of my teaching philosophy. As I discussed earlier, in my own undergraduate experience, the professors from the first principle is that in the classroom we respect one another's points of view to allow for the free exchange of ideas.

Whom I learned the most, those who challenged me, those who inspired me, those who made me hungry for more, all had one thing in common: they taught from who they were. They were real people with real lives, real strengths and weaknesses, real vulnerabilities.

My existentialism professor shared with us that he had an existential crisis every time he taught the course. My child development professor asked me to dog sit when she was on vacation—she lived in an actual house, with a husband, and a dog, a washer and dryer, and tortellini in the cabinets. My ethics teacher got visibly angry in class and seemed to take it personally when students were ill-prepared. My anatomy professor sometimes had to bring his young son to lab because of lack of other child care options. Who knew? Who knew that these professors, who tortured us on a daily basis with their required readings and assignments, were real people? What a difference it made to me to know that.

How do I incorporate this into my classroom? To be honest, I don't know how to keep this out of the classroom. My interpersonal style drives my teaching style. I am rather informal. I frequently use humor. Every example of a course concept that I provide comes from my personal experiences or the experiences of people I know. Don't get me wrong—I do not divulge inappropriate personal information to my students. But I am a person before I am a college professor, and I think that students appreciate knowing that. If am having a particularly bad day, I do not pretend otherwise. I often commiserate with students about the horrible parking conditions on campus or the terrible commuter traffic. If something exciting happens in my life, I will share that with them as well. For example, it was difficult for me to hide my excitement—or my ring, for that matter—when I got engaged last spring.

In the few minutes before class begins, I routinely ask students about issues or events that are important in their lives. I believe that all of these informal exchanges are important for developing rapport and mutual respect and for allowing students to see that I am person just like them. It reminds them that I once sat in their desks, and it produces an affinity between us. Why should this matter? It is certainly not necessary for students to like a professor in order to learn   Who knew that these professors, who tortured us on a daily basis with their required readings and assignments, were real people?

From her or him, but, in my experience, likeability goes a long way. Students are more motivated to attempt and complete difficult assignments if they do not want to disappoint their professors, even if their interest in the topic or assignment is limited. This can produce a snowball effect. I have had students tell me at the end of a semester that they were initially uninterested in my course, but that they made efforts because they liked me, trusted my judgment in providing them with useful assignments, or appreciated my classroom style.

Through their efforts, they found that they had interests and capabilities in the discipline of which they were not formerly aware. This led to further motivation and additional efforts on their part, resulting in increased competence. In the best of circumstances, this cycle becomes self-perpetuating. Students begin to take the initiative for further study them-   selves, often asking questions and engaging in activities that are beyond the scope of what is required in the course. What more could a professor ask for?   Finally, it is important to keep in mind that, like it or not, professors are role models.

As I discussed earlier, I remember being impressed when I was a student by professors who seemed to have figured out how to balance all of the aspects of their lives. I remember thinking, "Wow, she has everything that I want to have—a successful career, a family, diverse interests, a nice home. Having such professors as examples, and seeing that they had lives outside of academy, made my life goals seem attainable.

In spite of my remembering my professors as role models, I am always surprised to find that my own students view me in the same light. About five years after I started teaching, a student who had been a freshman during my first year of teaching came back to the college to visit. She was a graduate student in developmental psychology. She told me how I had inspired her throughout her under-graduate career, ever since her introductory psychology course, to pursue this goal. Similarly, just a few weeks ago, one of my current students, who had been struggling with some personal family circumstances, came by to discuss the final paper.

When I asked her how everything was going, she said that she often asks herself,

"What would Dr. Hanna do in this situation?" What a revelation both of these.   It is certainly not necessary for students to like a professor in order to learn from her or him, but, in my experience, it sure goes a long way. Experiences were to me! To know that I have made connections with students in ways that inspire them both intellectually and personally affirms for me the effectiveness and value of teaching from who I am. As time goes on, I am hopeful that I will be able to continue to apply the five principles of teaching successfully, and that my colleagues across disciplines might find these principles useful in their own course preparations.

I would also strongly recommend to all professors that you reflect upon your own philosophies of teaching. You will find it extremely valuable in delineating what is important to you as an educator and in helping to clearly define your course objectives. And you never know when you might suddenly be endowed with the title "award-winning teacher" and asked "What is your philosophy of teaching?"

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Teaching from Both Sides of the Desk by Nancy Hanna Nicastro

Nancy Hanna Nicastro received her Ph.D. in developmental psychology from Purdue University in 1994. She is currently teaching at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ. Her primary academic focus is on providing engaging and challenging learning experiences for her students. Other academic interests include peer relationships and identity development during adolescence and young adulthood, and the role of culture and individual experience in defining the transition to adulthood.