

“Why I like teaching”

A teaching philosophy statement by Virginie Pouzet-Duzer

Sometimes, at a random *soirée* where a friend of mine introduces me to a still unknown face, I am being abruptly asked why I like teaching. Quite often, my first answer to this is a smile, not so much because I need the time to find what to say but because you normally don't ask people why they like breathing, do you? Well, as a matter of fact, just like researching and writing, teaching is so important to me that it induces my whole lifestyle – and even conducts it.

As a matter of fact, I actually came to America to teach: to finish my Maîtrise FLE, I needed to gain some practical experience of teaching and my first moments as a teaching assistant were some type of practical training for me. Nowadays, nearly eight years later, I have to admit that my teaching experience in American universities has been quite varied. From language courses to culture and writing oriented ones, through the reading and literature course I am currently teaching, I believe that I have already a good idea of the diverse aspects of teaching French. Whatever the level is, the learning objectives of the course are always an aim I keep in mind and make my best to come back to throughout the semester. When I was teaching beginning or intermediate level French, I was not responsible for the syllabus and the learning objectives were established by the foreign language department as a common kind of contract shared by classes at the same levels, following a same syllabus and a same textbooks but having varied instructors. But this semester, since I had to prepare the syllabus totally on my own, I came back to a very detailed and precise list of objectives. For instance, I want my students to gain factual knowledge on nineteenth century literature and status of women at that time period, but I also want them, at the end of the semester, to be able to evaluate a text and discuss its connection with the literary movements of that time period. That is to say that I am not so much teaching French *per se* but cultural elements as well as ways of understanding an evaluating literature and painting.

You know now what I taught, but that does not say a lot about the “why”, does it ? Well, I like teaching because I have always loved learning. And I do not mean that learning equals teaching; this paradoxical equation implies that teaching is never static, that it puts the person teaching in some kind of a “danger”. What is at risk when you teach is not so much your knowledge and research-findings than your understanding of their implications: in the end, you necessarily always keep learning about your own teaching and even about yourself. And when I first taught, I expected my students to be reacting in a similar way, to be in class because they loved learning. Of course I was naive, as this is in fact rarely the case. Students might be in my French class with very practical goals just like going abroad the following semester as some of my previous students did. Others are there simply to fulfill a language requirement and motivated only by a grade as it is obvious in some of the evaluations of my French 63 (Intermediate level) class. These evaluations have made me realize how different my students actually were and how diverse their needs appeared. For instance the evaluations from my French 2 class show that some students wanted more grammar when others thought there was too much grammar. This semester, two of my students are shy and do not interact automatically with others while five other students love to play little theater skits and are really outgoing. And while all of them seem to learn very differently, the outcome of the class exchanges I read every week in the blog entries I have them write on the blackboard prove that all of them learn and progress – they just do it in their own way. This is the reason why I like to focus my lessons on my students' themselves, on what I know about them, and I prepare varied types of activities to make sure I address all the possible learning styles. And I also make my best to vary the groups and avoid putting the shy persons in pairs!

To come back to why I love teaching, it is because I enjoy challenge and believe that teaching is an action constantly in process. For instance, since my syllabus is prepared weeks before I teach and know my students, I always keep in mind that some of its content is going to evolve during the semester following my students' needs and learning styles. Because there is a dynamic in the teaching and in the learning, I consider that my role as an instructor is to prepare frames, to enable learning and communication. To a certain extent, I am responsible for allowing my students access to tools they need, and my job is to show them how to use these utensils. I am the providers of different types of tools, would they be

stylistic, grammatical or cultural and I make my best to give each and every student a detailed scheme on how, why and when they should require these apparatus. Sometimes, I would show them with examples what can be done – but most of the time I want them to try out, and I am here to help and see if they manage on their own. I am also the “frame” provider, that is to say I prepare the framing of the activities to make sure everybody is going to be active in them, and to enable communicative moments. For example, you can see in the first video presented on this page that the lecture and the power-point showing the paintings was just the frame of a game to find textual clues, and finding these clues was my student’s job. While I am a provider, an enabler if such a word exists, I am also a mentor to my students and this throughout the years. I have for example recently met a students I had a few years ago to discuss her choice of Law Schools, and was very happy to get the chance to recommend her. And while the provider role is connected to a class and a course, it seems that this exciting mentor role is mine for all my teaching life!

Using technology in a foreign language classroom is, I would argue, a great way of making sure students are responsible for their own learning. I use online anonymous polls prepared on blackboard to get direct and current feedbacks from my students and make sure they are doing fine. Thanks to these, I realized for instance that my students had some difficulties reading parts of *A Rebours* on their own at home and that they needed substantial questions and guidelines to help them precisely know on what they should focus and which parts were the most important for our class. And I provided them with such sheets of clues which made our following classes much more active and livable. This positive outcome was seeable directly in the classroom but also in the students’ following personal blog entries which were more developed than they usually were. Because they had thought about what they needed they had been responsible for their own learning and more active in its process – and the result was a better interaction in class as well as an improvement of their analytical skills observable in their writings.

Of course, the feedback I get from these online polls is often more positive – and that does not make it useless. I realized for instance thanks to it what had been mostly effective in class. Since they all particularly enjoyed the fake trial to know whether Salomé was guilty or not, I had to come up with other similar discussions activities to include in my following lesson plan. I indeed believe that learning should always be students’ centered, and I develop both my syllabus and my lessons plans by focusing on their needs as well as on their preferences. I have always had the chance to teach rather small groups which made it possible for me to have a very good idea of what type of learners each of my students were, and I am using multimedia extensively to make sure everybody finds at least once a moment adequate for his/her learning style. I give feedbacks to my students both in written and in recorded way, so that they get both to read and to listen. I also make my best to always remember what particular kind of skills the activities made in class are addressing – that is to say, I always keep Bloom’s taxonomy in my mind.

Following this positive feedback’s thread of thought, I have to admit that getting an idea about the helpful aspects of one’s teaching is also a great way of staying full of enthusiasm in the classroom – and enthusiasm is a quality which I find essential in a teacher and which my students seem to enjoy as well. And here comes the end of the loop: in a way, I like teaching because it works, since I can see how much students can improve throughout a semester – but it is probably *because* I like teaching that it works!

PS: Precise evidence to the claims made in this statement is available online at <http://www.duke.edu/~vap/Teaching.html> as well as upon email request.