'My Teaching Philosophy: How and Why I Educate Students' – David Nelson (October 2009)

After some brief investigation on the Internet as to exactly what is meant by 'your teaching philosophy' I gathered what you want to know is my views on how I educate students. I see my role as to impart my knowledge to the students, and expecting them to carry out further learning by reading recommended materials where necessary to enhance their understanding of the topic. What disappoints me is that it's fairly obvious that most of them don't do the required reading. I was really surprised in my lecture session last week when a student got the key text out and told me that he'd read the first two chapters!

What I thought I would do therefore, to explain my teaching philosophy, is to answer what I believe to be important questions. As a starting point, the questions that I intend to answer are:

1. How and why I got into teaching?
2. What I learnt as a student at university?
3. Why and how do I teach databases?
4. How do I assess students?
5. What kind of relationship do I try to build with students?

1. How and why I got into teaching?

I feel as if I owe my path from school to university to the support of some past teachers; two of my ex-school teachers and my college tutor, who helped me to gain a passion for the subject, and an interest in going to university to study computing. Since then, I've never been out of university and apart from a mild change of direction where I tried being a 'sys admin' for just over two years, but still in an university environment, I've never really wanted to leave the academic environment.

2. What I learnt as a student at university?

It was noticeable at university that the lecturers had varying teaching styles – ranging from hand-written notes to no notes at all. My personal preference was when lecturers produced part notes in advance and then spoke around the notes in the lecture. My lecture style has adapted from this. You need to give students something so that they are prepared in advance, and therefore feel as if in the lecture they can listen to what you say about the subject, thus ensuring that they maintain interest in the subject, and also so that they can see that the sessions have structure and objectives.

3. Why and how do I teach databases?

My PhD was in databases – this came from my final year project where I developed a fairly basic database application for a local hospital (having worked for that hospital during the previous summer vacation) and which therefore started my interest in databases. In the first year of the PhD I read the book 'Date' from cover to cover and that's where I learnt a great deal about database fundamentals. I've loved the subject ever since. My main interest is in data models. That was the subject of my PhD, and in my teaching it would be true to say that I concentrate mostly on or always relate to this subject. My enthusiasm in this area comes across when I'm talking to students – they are surprised when I tell them, for example, that I love normalisation. But it's always good when afterwards they come and tell me that 'now they understand it'. I like my passion and enthusiasm to come across when I'm teaching. It's noticeable that when I'm enthusiastic about a particular area

the students seem also to be more enthusiastic, willing to learn and most importantly willing to participate. I much prefer teaching smaller groups than large groups – this is because there's more chance of students interacting in smaller groups, and small groups are much easier to control. An example of this is the module CIF302 – I teach this module in two iterations to groups of 20-25 students per group. It's much better this way as it makes it easier to observe how the students are learning, aids direct discussion about the material towards the needs and level of understanding of the students, and helps to gain a good rapport with the students.

4.   How do I assess students?

My experience in assessment methods probably also comes from my time as a student. My recollection is that assessment for me was mainly via examination, and a few practical assignments test ability. I therefore always include examinations in my modules as I see this as a way of checking and assessing their understanding of the material that has been covered. I think that three hour exams are too lengthy and stressful for the students so always make them two hour exams at most. Coursework is also important in a subject such as databases to allow the students to demonstrate their practical skills. I think it is important to try new and novel methods of assessment –moving away from the 'essay question' type of coursework to more varied methods. For example, in two modules that I teach, one has a portfolio and one has a system development assignment. In both of these modules I include review sessions/early feedback mechanisms so that the students can gauge their progress, and this always achieves positive feedback. I see assessment as a way of checking students learning and as such when marking I try to give lots of written and verbal, feedback and a mark which reflects their understanding of the work.

5.   What kind of relationship do I try to build with students?

I want students to interact in sessions, I suppose I want them to be enthusiastic about databases and am disappointed when students just sit quietly and don't ask questions or participate in discussions or tutorial exercises.

Summary

So to sum up, my philosophy is to be enthusiastic about the subject, such that this imparts some enthusiasm and willingness to learn about the subject on to the students

After a discussion at the Disciplinary Commons meeting held in Greenwich, 30th October 2009, I can add this statement to my teaching philosophyhy. '*I want to teach what I believe interests students and what I find interesting, and find quality structures such as module descriptors inhibit the freedom that I would like when I teach*'.