

My philosophy of teaching, by Jason P. Boisvert

I think there are two sides to teaching: the good side and the bad side.

The bad side

We are the proprietors of the keys to the futures of many of our students. We make decisions late at night, while in a bad mood or rushed that then change forever the lives of many people.

For that reason, I would be happiest teaching from a very specific syllabus (or set of guidelines) given to me by those who have already done this a few times. It means that the variations of my mood or situation are mitigated as much as possible. It also gives me a clear role in relation to the students. I don't have to decide at the same time about both what is right or wrong and when someone is being right or wrong.

In this regard, I really like teaching Calc II or Calc III. Even though we lack a unified semester-to-semester set of rules to follow, for those levels of calc it usually turns out that the smaller groups can maintain continuity between sections and semesters. In calc I, I'm not so sure. The rules never seem to be defined.

(I don't have experience teaching classical math classes at a lower level, but that's mainly because I fear I would be seen as simply out of touch with their problems.)

I strongly believe that if the rules are relaxed or poorly defined, there will always be people who squeeze between the gaps and make the system fraudulent. That is in fact the whole problem in a nutshell, as I see it, anytime one group of people is expected to judge and make decisions for another group.

It isn't that I think students (or people) who are assertive -- and getting away with murder when that happens -- are being so necessarily maliciously. I don't exactly know how it all works. But I think I should expect students to look for an advantage where-ever they can.

It seems to me that it's precisely that quality of persistence in 'human nature' that brought us to where we are as a species on this planet. I want to encourage it no doubt, but in a healthy way.

For me, all this more or less boils down to the following behavior: While I try not to scare my students too much, I do try to actively give the impression that nothing comes easy. I scare them.

The good side

Some things do come, in time with persistence.

My general answer to a student who is discouraged about the amount or difficulty of their classwork is to tell them to work harder. It may seem silly, but I take exactly that advice very seriously in my own life.

Some students perceive that as unsympathetic. I would like to reach them if I could. On the other hand, I don't know of any other honest choice than to try harder. Sure, sometimes changing a method of study or instruction can help a few students somewhat, but I actually believe the best way to find the best method of study for a given individual is for that person to spend the time finding out what works. The only way I can think of to tell someone to do that is to say 'work harder'.

But for me this is actually encouragement. After all, what's the alternative to 'Work harder'? 'You're too stupid' ? Or worse, 'Let's change the rules'?

Certainly, there are situations where some license can be exercised to accommodate special needs. But in the case of special holidays and 'sporting situations' -- or even jobs -- or whatever, I think the best approach is to create a basic set of rules and act as though they can never be changed for anyone. If someone truly has a need for something 'special', that can always be done.

In terms of teaching style, I try to focus on the information mathematics represents, instead of, say, on the notational or 'theoretic' side of the discipline. It may be a personal bias, but I do believe it encourages students to think creatively about the subject.