Theresa A. Thorkildsen’s Teaching Statement

As a professor of human development in a research intensive university like UIC, I endeavor to help students understand their evolving identities as well as multiple perspectives in and about local and global communities. Participants in each course uncover a meta-narrative, structured with a clear beginning, an integrative middle, and an ending that encourages students to look for sequels. The narrative includes those details that allow learners to gain entry into multiple types of discourse while challenging them to solve problems and justify their solutions using convincing evidence. Imagine a three legged stool held up by the characteristics of each learner, multiple epistemologies, and tangible environmental resources.

I work with learners from a wide range of UIC’s Colleges and embed learning experiences in formal and informal interactions. I try to walk in the shoes of students well enough to understand their perspectives while supporting personal and collective agency and adhering to rigorous standards. Trained in the complexities of observational research, I continually practice these skills when supporting students’ involvement in small-groups, large class discussions, and one-on-one tutorials. Expanding opportunities for communication, I maintain listservs for each course and ask students to complete a range of reflective tasks, each of which offer a variety of modes by which students can share their knowledge. Listening and probing students to articulate their goals, needs, and perspectives ensures that all students have more than one opportunity to reveal what and how they are learning. I assess the effectiveness of these efforts by asking, “Have I left the teaching environment with at least one new story?” Affirmation shows that I have been ready to hear others in the room and negation suggests my own pedagogical shortcomings. Having been selected for a Silver Circle Award by UIC’s graduating seniors confirmed students’ appreciation of these efforts.

Whereas Education students are expected to master multiple epistemologies well enough to teach more than one, many students also come from specific disciplines. Thus, I try to help students with vastly distinct expectations learn to hear and respect one another. We take time to compare and contrast intellectual conventions that are salient in different discourse communities, and students regularly articulate the disciplinary lens through which they are addressing the problem of the day. I have designed materials to assist students in understanding these discipline-specific ways in which scholars distinguish what is worthwhile to know while nurturing enough skepticism to pressure learners into defending their beliefs, desires, and actions. I assess the effectiveness of this work by tracking the number of disciplines that are salient in the content of our interactions. As one student noted, “The problem with school is that teachers always expect us to go from point A to point B in a straight line. I think we should be able to go zigzag, or all the way around a problem if we want to, just as long as we get from point A to point B.” Sessions that balance logic, facts, and controversial themes with disciplinary conventions adhere to my ideal standard of success. Likewise, I work hard to model confidence about the importance of our work, pointing to everyday examples of personal, civic, and civil discourse as these align with the content of each instructional plan.

Development unfolds in discontinuous as well as in incremental ways over time. Thus, I use course objectives and formal standards to help learners identify the different types of knowledge that are valued in each interaction. Courses on human development include undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students in the same sections. Doctoral core courses typically include practitioners who are interested in becoming researchers as often as they include individuals at the beginning stage of a research career. Juggling this range of perspectives led me to construct what is now fashionably called “flipped” classrooms well before today’s technological affordances made this easier to implement. Learners engage in active problem-solving around tasks aligned with important course goals, monitoring and correcting their own progress as well as that of their peers. We rely heavily on rubrics to track the content of our conversations and establish criteria for success. A Teaching Recognition Program Award acknowledged my use of a highly diverse set of pedagogical tools within and across learning environments.

The tangible elements of our learning environments leave much to be desired. Yet, I show students how to overcome this lack of resources by engaging in deep, epistemologically-valid conversations. Together, we construct an evolving narrative and situate ourselves in relation to other local and global communities that share our abiding commitment to research on human development.

UIC’s (Career) Award for Excellence in Teaching Statement

Awarded for 2015-2016