

# Andy Frazee, MFA, PhD

## STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The day after final grades were released, Ben, a student in my Science, Technology, and Postmodernism literature course came to see me in my office. Ben was, like most of his classmates, an engineering student taking the course for humanities credit. At the same time, he—like, in fact, most of his classmates—was extremely engaged, motivated, and had insights into postmodern literature many English majors might not have. He stopped by to thank me—and as our discussion came to an end, he told me that he’d never taken a class that was taught the way I taught it. “How did you come up with that stuff?” he asked.

Ben was referring, I think, to how my courses emphasize student involvement in ways most of his other courses didn’t, particularly in the ways it prompted students to ask big questions, construct well-supported arguments, and collaborate with classmates (and with me) to—as I repeat over and over again in my writing and literature classes—*make knowledge together*. For me “that stuff” is the extension of a philosophical core informed by experience, training, and research in the scholarship of teaching and learning and student development theory. Borrowing the terminology of Lee Knefelkamp’s Developmental Instruction Framework (itself a pedagogical extension of William Perry’s theory of student development)<sup>1</sup>, I want to engage and motivate students by developing courses, lessons, and assignments that include a *diversity* of voices and viewpoints, provide *structure* where students need it, and that are grounded in *experiential learning*—all within a *personalist* learning environment in which students feel safe to contribute their opinions, ask questions, make mistakes, and grow into autonomous learners. To that end, my teaching practices are based on the following principles:

- I incorporate *diversity* into my courses by including a range of source texts, theories, and approaches; encouraging students to offer their own questions and ideas; prompting students to engage with ongoing scholarly and cultural conversations (and with each other); and recognizing the systemic racial, gender, educational, and other hurdles students may need support in overcoming.
- I leverage *structure* to both challenge and support students toward self-directed learning by providing a clear organization to courses, assignments, and lessons; being transparent in assignment instructions and assessment criteria; and incorporating scaffolding assignments that help students develop the strategies necessary to ask and answer big questions and pursue lines of inquiry that speak to their interests.
- I focus on *experiential learning* by including active learning and exploratory, writing-to-learn activities in and outside of class; focusing on the habits of mind, processes, and genres of academic, disciplinary, or professional thinking and communicating; and by having students reflect on the processes of critical thinking, argumentation, and learning.

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<sup>1</sup> See Evans, et al., *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), pp. 82-98, for an overview of Perry’s student development theory and Knefelkamp’s Developmental Instruction Framework.

- I create a *personalist* learning environment by emphasizing the classroom as a safe, respectful space open to diverse viewpoints; prompting students to consider their responsibility to collaborate with each other and with me in their learning; and emphasizing that the process orientation of learning and creating new knowledge requires rough, incomplete, in-process thinking and communicating—and even requires making mistakes.

What does this philosophy look like in practice? Coming to one of my classes on any particular day, a student will have read the day's assignment and offered up their own in-process questions and arguments about the reading via the course discussion board or blog; they will also have commented on other students' posts. On some days, that student will have just submitted a more substantive scaffolding assignment that asked them to find and summarize an academic article in preparation for an upcoming research assignment. During class, the student could expect to continue the conversation started on the discussion board through a learning activity that asks them to develop a research question about the day's reading—and then switch research questions with a partner and create a working thesis statement to her partner's research question. During the full-class discussion in which students offer up their research questions and working thesis statements, the student can expect for me to prompt them to elaborate and connect their ideas with those of other students in the class, emphasizing the importance of recognizing counterarguments and the necessity of evidence and reasoning.

By the end of the class period the student can expect to understand how the day's work fits with upcoming assignments and course outcomes—and how such learning transfers to other academic, professional, and cultural domains. Leaving the class, they will know exactly what's required for upcoming classes and assignments and will feel comfortable in asking me questions or coming to my office hours to discuss the feedback on her most recently-graded assignment. They will have engaged a diversity of viewpoints about the day's topic; practiced modes of critical thinking and argumentation through experiential learning; felt supported by the structure of the day's lesson and assignment instructions; and felt comfortable and confident in offering up Their own thoughts within a personalist learning environment. All of these things challenge and support them in taking responsibility for learning; entering into academic, disciplinary, or professional discourse communities; and learning strategies of critical thinking, research, and communication.

While I can't claim that most of "that stuff" I do in my teaching is of my own invention (and I told Ben as much), I do know that these things—especially the concepts of diversity, structure, experiential learning, and personalism—have made me, and continue to make me, a better teacher. More importantly, I have seen how these practices have motivated students to engage new and challenging problems, think and communicate critically and creatively, and ultimately take responsibility for their own learning.