

Teaching Statement

Thomas E. Fuller-Rowell

My understanding of teaching has been influenced by a range of experiences in and out of the classroom. I have found that the most powerful and effective teachers are at the same time students. They are continually working to acquire knowledge not only of course content, but also of the effectiveness of their teaching strategies. They struggle to achieve an increasingly nuanced understanding of their students in order to appropriately respond to their needs, as well as to convey knowledge in a way that is personal, relevant, and applicable.

As a civil rights educator in Buffalo, New York, part of my job was to give presentations several times a week to groups of individuals who had been awarded a Section 8 housing subsidy and were about to begin searching for housing. This group was at high risk for being inadvertently pushed into sub-standard sectors of the rental market due to discrimination from landlords and property managers on the basis of race, familial status, and other factors. My job was to describe the types of housing discrimination that commonly occur, explain the legal limitations on landlord screening practices, and communicate what we, as a non-profit organization, could do to help (e.g., investigate and take legal action against a perpetrating landlord in order to compensate them for discriminatory treatment). One of the difficulties of this presentation was that the content of legal material was not always intuitive. Furthermore, my audience was primarily single mothers with busy and stressful lives, who were not necessarily receptive to long lectures.

I learned that in order to engage my audience, I must develop my talks to be interactive and emphasize the personal relevance of the material. I invited individuals to share their own experiences, and used these experiences to illustrate the various forms of discrimination that occur. Additionally, I used related case study examples to communicate how we had tested for discrimination, taken legal action against landlords, and obtained compensation for individuals who had been discriminated against in the past. I also learned that, by linking discrimination to larger social issues, I could provide a bigger picture through which my audience could understand the importance of reporting housing discrimination. For example, by explaining how specific instances of discrimination can accumulate to create segregation and inequality across generations, I emphasized that in addition to gaining compensation for them, reporting discrimination has important implications for future renters and for issues of civil rights and social justice in society. Through these experiences, I learned to engage students and create a more organic and enjoyable learning experience. I also had the privilege of seeing how empowering knowledge can be. It was particularly rewarding to learn that many individuals had taken my lecture to heart, and subsequently reported instances of discrimination.

My memories of these teaching experiences have become a powerful reminder of the importance of making information relevant to student's lives. In my teaching, I seek to frame and reframe course material in ways that bring concepts to life, while also situating them within the context of current academic debate. I also strive to make course material personally relevant to students by assigning term papers, and weekly reflection pieces that allow students to apply theories from the course to their own experiences, or their own development. In designing lectures, I also make a substantial effort to link technical details to a larger picture of more obvious relevance. I believe that these techniques aid in student's engagement, and allow for deeper processing of content.

In addition to my work as a civil rights educator, another important experience that has also had a substantial impact on my understanding of teaching has been my involvement in a community-based project in New York City. This project involved developing partnerships with community-based organizations, and ultimately implementing a six-site action research process which involved working with groups of adolescents to evaluate neighborhood environments from a youth perspective. One of the purposes of this project was to empower youth by providing them with the resources to evaluate their own neighborhoods, as well as a venue to present their findings to city officials, organization directors, and other influential adults. We also facilitated cross-site communication throughout the project and organized culminating events so that youth could share their findings with the other participating sites. In addition to expanding my understanding of urban developmental contexts, my experience with this project has given me a range of facilitation skills and a relatively detailed practical knowledge of multi-group collaborative processes. It also serves as a strong reminder to me of the importance of allowing youth to become active participants in their own learning.

More specifically, my experiences facilitating, as well as my formal evaluation of the multi-site action research process (Fuller-Rowell, 2009), has lead me to the conclusion that group work can be an important tool for effectively engaging students. In particular, well facilitated group work can activate a healthy competitive motivation for students to represent themselves and their groups effectively, as well as an altruistic motivation to contribute to the knowledge of others. In my own classes, I plan to build in group projects and presentations that engage students in their own learning while also involving them meaningfully in the learning of others. Regardless of the size of a class, it is my view that group learning processes can be integrated into a curriculum in ways that enhance student motivation, engage them in active learning, and ultimately improve the overall learning outcomes of a course.

In addition to the importance of student engagement and collaborative learning, my experiences have taught me that I, as a teacher, can learn a lot from my students. In the words of Stephen Brookfield “the essence of skillful teaching lies in the teacher constantly researching how her students are experiencing learning then making pedagogical decisions informed by the insights she gains from student responses.” I constantly encourage students to provide feedback on all aspects of the course, from the content of lectures and discussions, to the fairness of an exam. I work in a variety of ways to provide venues for students to give me feedback from mid-semester formal evaluations to anonymous notes. In sum, I have found that students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, and who feel that they have some power to influence the ways in which they are being taught and evaluated, are the ones who learn the most.