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My Teaching Philosophy

For eight of the last nine years, I have taught Chinese both informally (as the sponsor of Chinese clubs in two middle schools and two high schools) and formally (as a classroom teacher of Chinese in two high schools). This Statement of Teaching Philosophy is a reflection of my values, beliefs and approach to teaching Chinese in light of my personal background, professional training and work experience.

Caring

The most important quality of any teacher is truly caring about the students themselves. This results in a passion not so much for teaching but more for the end result: students actually learning. And after all, learning is the whole reason we give of ourselves as teachers. When the teacher truly cares about the students, they can feel it and are more likely to engage themselves in the process…and even grow to like it!

In our pursuit of excellence in education, it is easy to overemphasize the obvious aspects: technical competence in the subject matter being taught, an aggressive curriculum, innovative technology for both the teacher and the students, etc. In doing so, it is easy to forget to look at things from the students’ point of view. As former high school students ourselves, we need to remember that high school is a time of mixed emotions, hopes, fears and dreams, accomplishment as well as failure, joy and disappointment. Because all students deserve to have a positive learning experience, where support and nurturing actually mean something, students really need to know that their teacher is in their corner, with their best interests at heart.

Being Open-minded

The second most important quality of a teacher is keeping an open mind about teaching practices. Teaching is more than simply reciting information and assigning homework, and one size does not fit all when it comes to education. Students come in all varieties, with different strengths and weaknesses, backgrounds and attitudes. Because different students have different aptitudes, the teacher needs to be open-minded and should always try to adapt to the students’ varied needs rather than the other way around. A single, inflexible approach will almost always favor some students at the expense of the others. Therefore, many different techniques of teaching and assessment should be used so that all of the students can learn to the maximum of their potential, which is both effective and fair.
Fundamentals

At the risk of sounding boring and old-fashioned, I believe that there should be a great emphasis on the fundamentals. Students are under pressure to be able to apply what they have learned. This is the goal of our teaching efforts. But students need to learn to walk before they can run, as is true for all of us. Foreign language study can be fun, but it can also be very challenging. And Chinese is considered to be as difficult as any foreign language can be for English speaking students, with two characteristics that are new and quite difficult for them: the written language uses characters exclusively (it is not phonetic in any way, without an alphabet or a syllabary), and the spoken language is tonal (the pitch and the change in pitch determine the meaning of a word). Too often these basic components of Chinese are not appreciated by students (and some teachers) so they are not given enough attention. Allowing students to skip the basic building blocks is almost certain to result in problems down the road, leading to frustration and finally giving up. This is bad teaching and is unfair to the students who look to us for guidance.

Education, as a profession, is constantly evolving, and it seems there are always new theories, techniques and approaches that we add to our existing styles of teaching. It is easy to get caught up in the latest trends, but the bottom line is how well students actually learn. We hope that they learn the subject matter and can apply it in their lives as future students, working professionals and as members of society. And as we teach our students the subjects, we hope to set good examples for them, as well. Caring about our students not only as students but also as our fellow human beings, adapting our teaching to their varied needs and making sure that they learn the essential elements before they try to move on to higher levels: this puts their interests first and gives them the best chance of a great education.