

Teaching Philosophy Statement Example #4

My philosophy of teaching is to create an environment that allows for supervised exploration. I believe that the most significant learning occurs in situations that are both meaningful and realistic. The overriding goal of my teaching has been to place learners in these types of situations: in the otolaryngology clinic for first year medical students learning the head and neck exam, at the patient's bedside for second year students learning to develop their clinical skills, in the operating room for otolaryngology residents learning the complexities of surgical care, even within an ongoing research project for graduate students learning the principles of bioinformatics. For situated learning to occur, the learner must be given access to the environment where the skills and knowledge will eventually be used.

For me, the best way to accomplish these goals is through small group or one-on-one teaching, particularly in a clinically relevant setting. The relevant setting is key: it allows the student to integrate knowledge into a useful framework and provides emotional resonance to the learning process. Learning in a clinical setting requires a delicate balance between safety and realism. The environment must be realistic enough so that the knowledge and skills that the student is learning are applicable to similar clinical situations in the future. However the setting needs to be safe enough so that the student feels empowered to explore the boundaries of their developing skills.

I have attempted to follow this philosophy throughout the various levels of teaching. For first year medical students, I teach the head and neck exam by having students come to the otolaryngology clinic where they learn and practice the exam in a small group with an otolaryngology resident. I teach about the doctor-patient relationship and about the diagnosis and treatment of oral cancer by having a discussion with a patient in which the key didactic points are made, but the students are free to raise questions of their own. First year preceptors are introduced to the clinical setting so they can see how their basic science and professionalism training will be utilized. In the second year Introduction to Clinical Medicine II course, the majority of the learning takes place in the hospital at the patient's bedside. This one-on-one and small group setting provides a controlled but clinically relevant environment to develop skills in history taking, physical examination, communication, clinical reasoning and teamwork. Third and fourth year students on clerkships learn as part of a team engaged in direct patient care. They are taught the relevant basic science and clinical knowledge related to their patients, but also how to identify knowledge deficits and resources to address these learning needs.

When teaching medical students, a 'safe environment' refers primarily to a setting that is safe for the learner to explore. When teaching residents however, a 'safe environment' also includes patient safety. Teaching in a surgical training environment is especially challenging, but a constructivist approach of graduated responsibility can help to meet this challenge. A constructivist approach to learning requires a diligent needs assessment to identify the starting knowledge base, and also continuing assessment of the student's learning. This includes establishing well-reasoned and specific goals and objectives for each stage of training, and a willingness to be flexible when necessary to meet the individual learner's needs. Regular formalized assessment and feedback are likewise vital. However, to really transition from a teacher-centered learning environment (such as the classroom) to a more learner-centered environment (such as the wards), students must identify learning needs in themselves, and assess their own progress. The use of portfolios, in the medical school, residency and faculty setting is one way that I have worked to foster self-assessment and help to instill life-long learning habits.