

STATEMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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My educational philosophy has been shaped preeminently by my own background in philosophical and theological studies and my contact with the school of Christian personalism. For personalist Emmanuel Mounier, the human person is a fundamentally social being whose true personality “awakens” through engagement in community. I believe that education necessarily plays a role in this awakening process. The educator’s task lies between the classical model which seeks rather to ‘make’ personality instead of awakening it, and a “functionalist” approach which – in the name of liberating the student – sometimes fails to engage the deeper self, merely equipping individuals to perform certain pragmatic tasks. To assist my students in awakening their dynamic intellectual selves, I strive to promote a two-fold awareness of the forces behind this process: first, the student’s own individuality; second, the community or the social ‘worlds’ which each student inhabits.

I have been humbled and honored to have colleagues and students alike remark upon the high level of participation my classes elicit from students, one observer noting that “at least every student contributed at some point” during a particular session. This participation is something I deliberately endeavor to foster in my classroom. Allowing students to speak in discussion is a primary tactic whereby I promote students’ awareness of their own voices – that is, their intellectual personalities. Ideally, I would like students to engage *one another*. I make it a point to ask class members to follow up on remarks made by their peers; in turn, I then allow students the opportunity to follow up with their own iterations by prompting them: “Do you think you’ve been understood? Would you like to respond?” Through peer engagement, students reflect upon how they are heard from outside themselves, and thus begin to analyze to what extent their intellectual self is authentically expressed or to what extent it becomes ‘lost in translation.’ Student iterations in class are always an entry into dialogue, an invitation to consider the ways one can be best understood – and, at least as often, a lesson in the ways to avoid being misunderstood.

Peer review exercises and group work also foster this self-awareness among students in my classroom. By frequently offering students opportunities to have real *readers* of their work, I intend to foster development from what Linda Flower calls “writer-based” to “reader-based” prose. For example, final drafts in my courses include a front-page questionnaire prompting students to reflect upon how they were able to actualize their own voices through the rhetorical task undertaken in the writing assignment. Here they are urged to explain how their peers’ readings influenced their reading of their own text. Another essential part of this reflection is for students to try to encapsulate concisely and clearly “what they have tried to say” in their papers, and to evaluate the extent to which they achieved this expression. I make it clear to students that this act of translation – from the impress understanding of self to the express representation of personality – is the work of a lifetime, and that the kind of self-awareness with which they write college papers can become a paradigm for every social engagement in which the self seeks to make itself known to the other.

In addition to awareness of self in the awakening of personality, I hope that students will reflect upon the ways in which their ‘worlds’ influence this process. I define for students three worlds which participate in shaping them as persons: the worlds of their past, present, and future. I encourage students to draw experience from their family and community life into assignments whenever appropriate. Additionally, I design lessons to engage what I call the “monuments” of cultural heritage: works of art and literature, customs, foods, etc., which are in some way typical of the dominant culture in which students live. The goal here is to engage these artifacts *critically*, to realize their influences and to probe the question of hegemony. Through this process, students may become aware of ‘voices’ missing from the mainstream culture that are nonetheless personally relevant, and thus to expire a sense of *exigency*, a need to interject their own voice into the discourse so as to bring greater light to these crowded-out influences.

As students become more aware of themselves and of the ‘worlds’ of which are a part, I ask them frequently to reflect upon the discussions happening in those worlds and which ones seem most to miss their voices. I express often to my students the hope that they will find my classroom a singular world amidst the many worlds they occupy, one where they can feel safe and emboldened to test their ideas, to receive fair and kind criticism, and to discover their own voices and – hopefully – something of their true selves which they hope to share with others.