



Episode 8: Establishing and Revisiting Our Teaching Philosophies and Teaching Personas

SPEAKERS

Linda Shadiow, Tierney King, Parker J. Palmer, Maryellen Weimer

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. I'm your host, Tierney King. And I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in-person or virtually to pursue your passion for teaching. Today, we're going to talk about teaching philosophies, and how what you do and why you do something aligns with the who behind it all. Your teaching philosophy helps examine who you are as a teacher, and examines what beliefs and values are at the heart of what you do. Now, at the beginning of your career, you may not spend as much time on your teaching philosophy, there's prep work to do, instructional details that need your attention, and more. But Maryellen Weimer mentioned that at some point, most of us do start thinking about what we're doing, and whether it jives with what we believe in. So today, we're going to talk about how you can help define your own teaching philosophy, and kind of pinpoint what you think your own teaching persona embodies. In Linda Shadiow and Maryellen Weimer's seminar, Who Am I When I Teach? Understanding the Teaching Persona, they reflect on stories that help them question their identity in the classroom.

Linda Shadiow 01:23

Just when I thought I had it all together. One day, when I was walking into class, early in my career, I had the content, I had the questions, I had the syllabus, finish the class day, and then all of a sudden a student put a hand up right before we were to conclude, and said, What do you want us to call you? And I was stumped. What they were really asking was, who are you? And how do you want us to know you?

Maryellen Weimer 01:56

And it's a question I think that we like, because of its balance. It's about making choices. So that who you are as a teacher enables you to thrive, helps your students to learn, and invites learning the content. And one of the things that has become sort of clear to Linda and I is exploring further the relationship between the teaching persona or the teaching identity and the identity of you as a whole person. And our thinking is that the whole person is your identity, it's the sum of all that you are and that the teaching persona is what we draw from that larger identity to create this teaching person that then becomes our identity in the classroom. So it's the sum, the identity is the whole, and the teaching persona is a collection of parts of that larger whole. And so a lot of times I think faculty are aspiring to

do what they think good teachers are supposed to do. And while I certainly wouldn't say that we want to not do that, personal set of characteristics should come from within us, as opposed to being something that is externally imposed upon us. And so well, all good teachers are organized, the way in which you convey that organization ought to be a personal sort of expression so that you are organized in ways that fit comfortably with who you are, how you teach, what you teach, and the learning needs that your students might have. And so I think we've got an interesting quotation here from Christa Walck, which sort of gets at what we're talking about here. And she is wondering about how she crosses the border from ordinary life to ordinary class from being this larger person to being a teacher with students in a text, and to create out of that teaching persona these extraordinary places where learning can occur. When you think about what message you want your teaching persona to communicate to students, what's popping in your mind what word or phrase is coming up?

Linda Shadiow 04:16

What do you want to come to their mind, what comes into your mind, what do you want to come into their mind? Knowledgeable, fair, honest, hone in on a word or a phrase.

Maryellen Weimer 04:30

I often tell my students about the most difficult interview question that I was ever asked. It was for an overseas teacher exchange program that I very much wanted to participate in. And the question was, How would you describe your personality in one word? And to not have had any time to prepare an answer to that, it was a terribly challenging question, but the word that I selected is also the word that I would pick to go in response to this question too, and that is the word sincere.

Tierney King 04:58

This word or phrase that you choose might change as you experience more and as you teach longer. One of the things Maryellen and Linda touch on is the fact that looking back on things you did in the beginning as a first year teacher versus now is a very good reflection of change and growth.

Maryellen Weimer 05:16

I know just before I retired, I discovered syllabus that I had written very early in my teaching career, and I felt like I should burn it. I thought that if anyone saw it, they probably would fire me. So those kinds of changes are useful to see as we make the transition across the year. It's useful when those are purposeful as opposed to happening sort of haphazardly.

Linda Shadiow 05:41

It's also useful to think about why those shift when you go back, and I'd be curious, Maryellen, when you say you want to burn the first syllabus you ever produced, what makes you say that now? I think those are instructive questions for us to turn in on ourselves so that we can understand not just the product of our movement, but also the impetus for that movement.

Maryellen Weimer 06:05

And I think what our feeling has been, what we've been talking about, is that how if you do create an authentic, genuine teaching persona, that is a reflection of who you are as a human being that that really does become or can become a powerful conduit between you and the students learning. If

students can connect with you as a human being as a teacher who cares about them and is committed to the content and to their learning, then I think what that does is to really inspire students and sort of ignite them. As you might suspect, the metaphor conduit is another one of Linda's, and I think is a good way to think about how teaching persona can connect with students and become what really motivates energizes their efforts to learn.

Linda Shadiow 06:55

So that conduit really is a pathway to the content and learning. So the biology professor who says, "I love biology. I got a toy microscope when I was young and spent my childhood looking at pond scum." That is actually a story told by someone who went on to win a Nobel Prize in biology. So how do we link who we are to that content? One of my early mentors suggested that I keep a joy file, and not just those notes that students write back to us years later, but the artifacts of a class. My joy file still has something from the '70s where a student in a class where we were studying Don Quixote, that novel, a student brought in a package of windmill cookies, and wrote a note that said, "Now you cannot only battle windmills as Don Quixote does in that novel, but eat them, too." So a persona as a conduit can ignite and inspire, not only the learning environment and students, but can fuel us in teaching.

Tierney King 08:07

Establishing a teaching philosophy isn't easy. It definitely takes a lot of exploring and deep diving as an instructor. So sometimes when you start off as a new teacher, you want to establish this persona, to help define yourself as a teacher. But you may be battling with numerous vulnerabilities when first starting out. Well, according to the Parker, J. Palmer, this is completely normal. And it's exactly why he wrote his book, *The Courage to Teach*. In this seminar, Maryellen Weimer interviews Parker as he reflects on feeling vulnerable as a teacher, and how he realized that others who taught also shared these vulnerabilities.

Parker J. Palmer 08:46

In the book I explore some of the ways in which I have felt vulnerable and have learned in the years since the book's publication that many teachers share these vulnerabilities with me. As I say in the book, I think teaching stands at the intersection of the public and the personal. And what I mean by that has nothing to do whether one is standing up there telling personal secrets, which I don't think is appropriate, but what you are doing, if you care about your discipline, is sharing subject matter that has been deeply formative of your life that you do care profoundly about. And you're sometimes sharing it At some deep level there is what I call in the book, our fear of the judgment of the young, and I think, you know, I say in the book that the older you get, and I think you age sort of exponentially or geometrically in the teaching profession because as you grow older, your students stay the same age, and you become middle aged very quickly. I think the older you get the more you feel some distance from that rising generation and the more likely you are to interpret or, I believe, misinterpret the signals they're giving to you as signals of judgment or disdain. I think, in fact, they're signals of fear, which is one of the topics that I explore at some length in the book. But when we don't understand the fear in ourselves, that then starts to resonate with the fear in our students. What could be a vital learning situation, I think, gets all locked down by the multiplication of fear. I remember when I was writing *The Courage to Teach* coming across a saying that apparently is fairly prevalent in the training of therapists, where it's said that technique is what you use until the real therapist shows up.

Maryellen Weimer 10:57

Oh, that's good.

Parker J. Palmer 10:58

And I like that a lot. As a person who visits with a therapist, from time to time to keep my psyche whole, I recognize that the person doing that kind of work would in the beginning, certainly as young teachers do, need techniques to sort of get through the day. But but the hope is that as you mature in the profession, more and more of your selfhood shows up. I think tips, tricks, and techniques will always remain popular. For one thing, because it's the easier route to showing up in the classroom than it is to show up as your as your true self with all of your passions and your relational capacities, intact. Tips, tricks, and techniques, in a way, are mechanisms of control. And so they allow you to shape the space and what goes on in that space in a way that keeps you from becoming surprised, you know, they sort of get you ahead of the train wreck. Well, there are some of us who feel that, you know, while a certain degree of order is essential to the teaching and learning process, and I'm one who feels that way, that the real action doesn't happen until you're in the middle of the chaos. You know, until you're floundering around trying to figure out even what the right question is right, let alone what the right answer is right. And at the deepest reaches of all great scholarship, I think it's this kind of floundering that leads to a question nobody ever thought to ask before. And that in turn leads to an answer that nobody ever thought to give before. And that's called breakthroughs or on a lower level, it's called new learning. So as long as we're dedicated to controlling the situation in a way that keeps us in our comfort zone, then I then I think we're sort of dead in the water. I mean, we can continue to turn the crank on that, we can continue to get, you know, decent statistical outcomes on standardized tests. We can continue to get passable ratings on our on teaching evaluations, but my commitment, your commitment, the commitment of a lot of good people in this field, is to swimming in deeper waters than that. I don't quite know how else to put it. And to say, you know, there comes the point when after we've got our ducks lined up in a row, after we've got the facts laid out, after we've got the current theoretic apparatus in place and available to folks, let's dive deep and see what else is there. And let's take the risk that things are going to happen that we don't know how to handle, maybe somebody starts to drown, maybe I start to drown. But those safety lines are available that we can rescue each other. We can create communal situations in which people help each other out. And something more like the vitality of real learning occurs. I would think that on everybody's personal journey toward professional life, you can, I can, I can certainly look back and I think a lot of us can. I can look back to those times when I was floundering and not and feeling lost in alien territory, as as the richest times of learning and the breakthrough in my intellectual life.

Tierney King 14:53

And lastly, Maryellen reminds us that it's good to revisit your teaching philosophy from time to time. You may think you have executed and written the perfect teaching philosophy for yourself. But just remember to look back on it in six months, a year, or even five years from now. In Maryellen's Teaching Professor article she says, and I quote, "Revisiting a statement prepared earlier is like looking at the teacher you once were, and seeing what's changed. I look at my hands. They're still mine, unlike anyone else's, but now their old hands. Seeing change is instructive. Sharing teaching philosophies reveals different belief structures and enables us to discuss the relative merits. These statements of

belief make clear the largeness of what education attempts to accomplish. We teach to make lives better today and tomorrow." Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute thinks session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.