

Mr. Boomsma's Teaching Philosophy

January 2, 2022

"Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of the learners."

John Holt, Growing Without Schooling, Volume 1, 1977-1981

When I challenged myself to describe my teaching philosophy, I remembered announcing a few years ago that I was quitting teaching. I knew I was on the right track when an adult student who'd just finished an advanced college degree announced at the beginning of our first class, "I'm tired of learning." I honestly believed she was tired of being taught. Learning is fun. Maybe if I quit teaching, she'd learn that.

"When the student is ready, the teacher will appear."

Unknown¹

The first challenge is usually getting the student "ready" with to believe that they can learn the lesson. And it doesn't seem to matter whether they are five years old or fifty. It's a common need for learners.

Learning may be fun, but it is also work. One difficult task for the student (who should be doing most of the work) is overcoming restrictive thinking. "I'll never get this!" "It doesn't make sense." "I've always thought..." These statements are defeatist and should challenge the teacher to approach things differently.

I was once drafted to substitute teach a second-year high school Spanish class. As the students (who knew me) arrived, one looked at me in disbelief. He said, "Mr. Boomsma, do you even know Spanish?"

My reply was, "No, I do not. But I do know how to teach it. Let's get started." When class ended, even the students agreed it was a pretty good class, different than the usual drills and practice they did. Similar experiences have led me to speculate that SMEs (subject-matter experts) are often disadvantaged teachers. They already know the stuff they are trying to teach. That can make it hard to understand why the students don't and how they can best learn it.

"I don't teach courses; I teach students."

Mr. Boomsma²

Teaching must be obsessively focused on learners' needs. The most effective teachers are catalysts and facilitators. While it sounds simplistic, **the purpose of education (or teaching) is to make learning happen as efficient, effective, and enjoyable as possible.** I like to think of it as teaching students how to use their brains well.

¹ Attributed to many different people ranging from Socrates to Buddha. There are also claims that it is of "Theosophical origin." Lao Tzu allegedly said, "When the student is truly ready the teacher will disappear."

² Mr. Boomsma, *Small People—Big Brains*, 2013, Abbot Village Press, Chapter 5, "I'm Quitting Teaching."

One of my classroom rules with older students is that you are not allowed to say, “Mr. Boomsma said...” You are only allowed to say things like, “I learned that...” We also use the word “yet” a lot. “I don’t understand this yet.”

An additional learning challenge is that we’ve downplayed the importance of achievement and up played the importance of effort for some years now. Doing so deprives students of the opportunity to learn. Indeed, we should recognize student effort. But the deep joy of learning comes from learning, not simply trying to learn. Recognition is a suitable reward for effort, but achievement is the most significant reward. In our effort to protect a student’s self-esteem, we need to guard against discouraging them from discovering their potential and capabilities. That may mean believing in the student even when the student doesn’t.

Adult students often tell me that it’s obvious I love teaching. I’m always tempted to correct them, but usually manage to stop at enjoying the compliment. What I enjoy the most is watching learning happen. I think that’s different than teaching.

It’s a double win because often, when the student learns, I learn something too. I have figured out another way to make learning efficient, effective, and enjoyable.

My bias with a struggling student is that we are both not achieving our potential. I haven’t yet figured out a way to “teach” that works for that student. When I do, we will both be very happy. I recently had a struggling adult student who said, “I think you are going to be as happy as I will be when I pass the exam.”

I can live with that.