PEDAGOGICAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

This document is designed to foster your learning of new teaching skills, raise pedagogical issues on which it will be valuable for you to reflect, and help you become attentive to matters of classroom ethos and the power dynamics involved in teaching and learning. It is best used in close consultation with the professor for whom you will be working.

Here you will find information on:

1. **Differing Roles and Temperaments of Teachers**

2. **Multiple Learning Styles of Students**

3. **Teaching, Authority, and Power**
   - Sharing Power by Communicating Your Expectations
   - Helping Struggling Students

4. **Evaluating Student Writing**
   - Detailed Feedback on Student Papers

5. **Evaluating Student Midterm and Final Examinations**
   - Detailed Feedback on Exams
1. Differing Roles and Temperaments of Teachers

There are many ways in which a teacher can teach creatively and effectively. You will draw on a variety of skills and various kinds of knowledge throughout your career as a teacher. You may find that your teaching temperament changes as you move from one job to another or from one classroom context to another. Your teaching style may change as you go through professional and personal life changes. Attending to how you understand your role, your strengths, and your vulnerabilities is an important part of preparing to teach effectively.

The following two elements are crucial for effective pedagogy with adult learners, whatever your teaching style may be. You have your own ideas about what is essential for good pedagogy as well. Share them with your professor and your T. F. colleagues!

1) Flexibility regarding the ways in which you judge students competently to have addressed themselves to the learning in the course. Some students with strong undergraduate training in literary criticism may be able to write papers extremely well but have little sense of the theological issues at stake in a particular theologian’s argument. Other students, perhaps second-career types or pastors who are only now coming back for their academic credentials, may express their ideas more haltingly in writing but may have a wonderfully seasoned, mature view of theological issues related to Biblical interpretation. Some students may feel the pressures of their own interpretive communities (ecclesial or academic) so acutely that they cannot risk opening themselves to some of the ways of thinking that we emphasize in the course. They may seem not to have mastered the finer points of a method when what is (also) going on is that they are resisting the world view that the method implies. Yet other students may be solid or even gifted students who do not apply themselves to the writing tasks or to studying for the exam, so they may present the beginnings of good ideas without much follow-through. It is the task of the good teacher to be as flexible as is reasonable in judging how students have fulfilled the requirements of the course, without being too “soft”—low expectations encourage poor performance—or too rigid.

2) Ability to communicate a passion for the subject matter and an interest in how people learn it. What are you convinced is most important about the subject matter you are teaching? Why should someone else care about it? Communicate your enthusiasm, your curiosity, your contagious excitement in whatever ways are natural to your temperament. The old-school model of the “jaded expert” who sits sphinx-like with awed disciples at his feet does not motivate most adult learners, unless the “jaded expert” has managed to create a cult of personality around himself. Communicate why this material is exciting! Help your students see why learning it should be a rewarding experience for your students. Of course, in order to do that, you will need to know what matters to your students as well as what is intrinsically fascinating about the subject matter.

What metaphor(s) for teaching come to mind when you consider your role as a teacher of M.Div., M.A.R., and S.T.M. students at Yale Divinity School? I specify the context—
the different degree programs and the Yale Divinity site—because context matters a great deal for how one teaches responsively.

Which of these roles fit your view of your own teaching? More than one may apply:

credentialed expert
midwife
leader of an expedition
learned companion
guardian of the discipline
guide
shepherd
boot-camp sergeant
motivational speaker
advocate for my students
facilitator
sage

A word of caution from the pastoral-theology department: sometimes learning can be a difficult or traumatic experience. If there have been times in your own learning when you have felt marginalized, put down, humiliated, or inadequate, you may have some emotional “baggage” or issues that need attending to as you move into the role of teacher. Sometimes you can discern that your motivation may not be entirely about maximizing student learning. For example,

- You may find yourself thinking, “Look, I had to spend 5 hours a day studying Hebrew. . .” or, “I stayed up all night to keep up with the reading in X class. . .” or “I had to learn to deal with Professor Z’s withering comments in front of my peers . . . so darn it, these students should have to do that too!” This is a variation of the “I had to walk ten miles to school in the snow, so quit yer whining” kind of thinking. It’s not healthy. While holding students to rigorous expectations can be an important motivating factor for them, you are crossing the line if you think they should have to suffer as you suffered! Give students tips about effective study habits instead. Share the wisdom you’ve gained from your own student experiences.

- As a way of overcompensating for past experiences of demanding or inaccessible teachers in your own life, you may find yourself trying to be all things to all students, endlessly accessible and affirming even if they test the boundaries of appropriate behavior or ignore course expectations. Reflect on what roles are appropriate for you as teacher: while “advocate” is appropriate, “pastoral counselor,” “mother,” and “best friend” are not.
2. Multiple Learning Styles of Students

Much research has been done on the rich and complex ways in which students learn at the pre-school and elementary instructional levels. Teachers now understand that most young children learn holistically by creating webs of association as they integrate new information and master new skills. Early childhood education some decades ago (at least in North America) was often structured as if children were tiny adults. Classrooms were set up with 25 desks all in neat rows, and children were expected to sit still and simply absorb information, interacting with each other and their environment only in carefully controlled ways. Rote learning was heavily emphasized in some settings, and punishment for inattention or for “coloring outside the lines” in various ways was routine. Thankfully, early childhood educators these days have developed much more effective ways to support children’s learning.

- Good teachers create a “safe” learning space in which varying skill levels are respected, children are directed away from framing their learning in terms of competition, and each child is affirmed enough that s/he can dare to take the risks that learning always involves.
- Good teachers engage all of children’s senses, not just their cognitive abilities.
- Good teachers support children’s learning in social groups, sometimes using peer teaching relationships across different grade levels.
- Good teachers respect and affirm what children already know, while inviting them to expand and deepen their knowledge and learn new things.
- Good teachers invite children into decision-making and the development of judgment.
- Good teachers encourage imaginative play in classroom centers that provide a variety of related kinds of learning opportunities.

Many of the above insights apply as well to adult learners. Consider the following points too:

1. All learners have a need for freedom of cognitive range, affirmation, and a sense of safety so that they can take the risks associated with learning.
2. Applying new skills in concrete contexts is a crucial part of learning for children and adults alike.
3. Learners learn best when they experience respect for their judgment, latent knowledge, and emerging abilities.
4. Imaginative work and collaboration in groups can reinforce and deepen learning.

Adult learners may experience irritation or anxiety about having to “start over” as novices when they may have enjoyed a high degree of competence professionally before coming to graduate school. Frustration, a heightened sense of risk, and confusion can result for adult learners when teachers do not engage the variety of
learning temperaments and kinds of expertise that exist in the classroom. It is essential that teachers learn to recognize and, where possible, affirm the different kinds of learning strengths that adults bring to the classroom. Sometimes a single course cannot structure assignments that bring out all of students’ different learning strengths. For example, it is not normally feasible in a large lecture course to assign artistic projects, field trips, or community-based experiential learning. Still, teachers can do a lot to engage different learning temperaments in the classroom in small creative ways. Think about creative possibilities for your sections, in line with your own temperament, of course, but responsive to other types as well.

Below is a summary of research done on learning styles by David A. Kolb, creator of the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, who based his work on a number of “theories of thinking and creativity,” including the theories of Jean Piaget and J. P. Guilford. There are other kinds of assessment tools and research on learning styles as well. One resource potentially of interest is the Keirsey Temperament Sorter, based on the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator. (See Please Understand Me II by David Keirsey; Del Mar, California: Prometheus Nemesis, 1998.)

The below is taken from the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, Version 3 (© 1999). Kolb plots learners’ strengths and affinities on a grid with four components, below. He calls these the ‘four phases of the learning cycle.’

**Concrete Experience (Experiencing)**
- learning from specific experiences
- relating to people
- being sensitive to feelings and people

**Reflective Observation (Reflecting)**
- carefully observing before making judgments
- viewing issues from different perspectives
- looking for the meaning of things

**Abstract Conceptualization (Thinking)**
- logically analyzing ideas
- planning systematically
- acting on an intellectual understanding of a situation

**Active Experimentation (Doing)**
- showing ability to get things done
- taking risks
- influencing people and events through action

Different learners privilege those four areas of learning differently, depending on temperament and contextual variables. There is no one “right” or “best” way to learn, although there are learning styles that are better suited to one learning task or another. Well-balanced learners will learn in many of the ways listed above, drawing on one or
another aspect as needed. Other students may have significant strengths in one area but find learning daunting or uninteresting in one of the other areas, or they may wish to become stronger in a new skill but be uncertain how to proceed. Facilitating skills for learning itself is part of your job!

The **Kolb Learning Style Types** are based on various combinations of two of the four phases of the learning cycle, as in the following material quoted from the Learning Styles Inventory.

**DIVERGING**  
*Combines Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation*  
People with this learning style are best at viewing concrete situations from many different points of view. Their approach to situations is to observe rather than to take action. If this is your style, you may enjoy situations that call for generating a wide range of ideas, such as brainstorming sessions. You probably have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. This imaginative ability and sensitivity to feelings is needed for effectiveness in arts, entertainment, and service careers. In formal learning situations, you may prefer working in groups to gather information, listening with an open mind, and receiving personalized feedback.

**ASSIMILATING**  
*Combines Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization*  
People with this learning style are best at understanding a wide range of information and putting it into concise, logical form. If this is your learning style, you probably are less focused on people and more interested in abstract ideas and concepts. Generally, people with this learning style find it more important that a theory have logical soundness than practical value. This learning style is important for effectiveness in information and science careers. In formal learning situations, you may prefer lectures, readings, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through.

**CONVERGING**  
*Combines Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation*  
People with this learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. If this is your preferred learning style, you have the ability to solve problems and make decisions based on finding solutions to questions or problems. You would rather deal with technical tasks and problems than with social and interpersonal issues. These learning skills are important for effectiveness in specialist and technology careers. In formal learning situations, you may prefer to experiment with new ideas, simulations, laboratory assignments, and practical applications.
ACCOMMODATING

Combines Active Experimentation and Concrete Experience

People with this learning style have the ability to learn primarily from “hands-on” experience. If this is your style, you probably enjoy carrying out plans and involving yourself in new and challenging experiences. Your tendency may be to act on “gut” feelings rather than on logical analysis. In solving problems, you may rely more heavily on people for information than on your own technical analysis. This learning style is important for effectiveness in action-oriented careers such as marketing or sales. In formal learning situations, you may prefer to work with others to get assignments done, to set goals, to do field work, and to test out different approaches to completing a project.

While the pedagogical objectives of the course cannot be tailored to each student’s learning strengths, it is important for the teacher to be as responsive as possible to the ways in which students learn and the diverse motivations students bring to the classwork. You can shape class exercises to call on various skill sets among your students. You can have them work on the relevant texts in small groups. You can challenge them to move outside of the “comfort zone” of their most familiar learning style. If you are flexible and responsive as a teacher, your students will see how they can be flexible and responsive as learners.

3. Teaching, Authority, and Power

Learning how to construct and express your authority as a teacher is one of the most fascinating and challenging aspects of pedagogy. You should discuss this with your professor and your T. F. colleagues as issues arise.

Sharing Power by Communicating Your Expectations

All students, and adult learners in particular, benefit from clarity about performance expectations. Some effective teachers develop a section of their syllabus that explains exactly what will qualify as Honors work, what constitutes B+ work, and so on.

It will be important to keep clear in your own mind how strong a student’s work is, especially for cases in which students contest their grades. One student’s overall grade may lie between H and H-, but her assignments were all on the low end of the grade so that you will decide not to revise upward. Another student’s grade may lie between H and H-, but several of his assignments just barely missed earning a straight H; in that circumstance, you may choose to round the grade upwards.

I find it useful to employ the following point scale when doing the math to calculate students’ overall grades. (I use these points for my own purposes. I do not communicate them to students unless they press me for a justification of their grade.)
strong H  16 points  
   H   15 
   low H  14 

strong H-  13  
   H-   12 
   low H-  11 

strong HP+ 10  
   HP+  9 
   low HP+  8 

strong HP  7  
   HP   6 
   low HP  5 
   HP-   4 

P    3  (“P" is a probationary grade; there is no P+ or P-) 
F    0

If a student’s overall score is 9.1, you can see that the student has earned a solid HP+ but was not close to getting an H-. But if a student’s overall grade is 10.8, you may well justify rounding the grade up to H-. Use quantifiable methods wherever possible, even if the criteria themselves are somewhat impressionistic. If you simply read a paper and tell yourself, “That looks like an HP paper to me,” you may have a lot of explaining to do if the student contests the grade. With up to 40 students and their various assignments running together in your mind, you may even need to reread the paper closely in order to remember the grounds on which you had made your impressionistic judgment call. Better to prepare carefully in your evaluation the first time through.

**Helping Struggling Students**

Every year, a few students fail to meet course expectations at YDS. They may have pre-existing emotional difficulties or addictions, a crisis or unexpected challenge may emerge during the semester, or they may find that they cannot manage the demands of graduate-level work.

Signals that a student may be in distress include:

-- absenteeism or flagrant lateness
-- inappropriate language or behavior in class
-- tears or anger when meeting with you
-- appearing disoriented, confused, euphoric, or depressed in class
You are not their therapist or counselor. Please let your professor know immediately if a student shows any of the above signs or for any other reason gives cause for concern. Do not try to handle this on your own. You should always consult with your professor. The professor will consult with the Associate Dean for Student Affairs as needed.

4. Evaluating Student Writing

Providing detailed feedback on student papers is an effective way to engage students in intensive, in-depth learning on a particular topic. When a teacher spends time reflecting on and communicating about student work, students feel that their time and effort has been honored and that their learning matters. This not only makes them appreciate your teaching more; it encourages them to continue to learn in this class and in future classes. Conversely, students can be bitterly disappointed or even insulted when they spend 20 to 30 hours on a paper despite competing demands of job, ministry, and family, only to receive back from their teacher just a few scrawled notes, “See Niebuhr on this,” or “logic needs work here,” or “strong paper, but needed better conclusion.” For students underprepared by their college backgrounds, second-career students anxious about performance, and students who have too much of their self-esteem wrapped up in the approval of others, a dismissive or bored teacher response can be devastating. Show students that you respect their efforts.

Every student paper presents the teacher with important opportunities for affirming, contesting, redirecting, and nuancing the claims made and interpretive trajectories undertaken by the student. To teach well entails being as responsive to these opportunities as your own time and other obligations permit.

You will find your own structures and rhetorical rhythm for commenting on student papers. I have found it helpful to begin with a short introductory paragraph that affirms whatever I can (even in poorly done papers). I follow this by two or more paragraphs that comment in detail on the substance of the paper, inviting the student to consider content or hermeneutical claims in alternative ways where necessary. If there are proofreading or other minor problems with the paper, I tend to mention them just briefly toward the end. I always close with an affirmation, even if all I can muster for a particularly flawed effort is, “Thank you for your work.”

If there are serious flaws in a student’s writing or logical argumentation, you should refer the student to the YDS Writing Consultant. Try to do this in a way that does not shame your student. Use an evenhanded tone when noting the flaws in a student’s writing—avoid impatient comments like, “This sentence is abominable!” You can offer positive motivation for improving, such as, “I want you to be able to make the very best argument you can,” or, “For your next paper, see the Writing Consultant so that your writing will do justice to the good ideas that you want to express.” Students may be more likely to go to the Writing Consultant if you suggest it cheerfully to the entire class early in the semester and supply contact information for the Writing Consultant.
All Divinity students should have received the YDS document on plagiarism that is handed out at orientation for new students. If you suspect plagiarism, consult your professor about how to handle it. Your professor will likely ask you to document the plagiarism by making annotated photocopies of the paper and the source(s) on which the paper has drawn. Under no circumstances should you accuse a student of plagiarism based on an unsubstantiated hunch.

5. Evaluating Student Midterm and Final Examinations

Exams can be marvelous teaching tools, if teachers take the potential of the medium seriously rather than considering exams as “hoops” through which students must jump. Students learn virtually nothing from receiving exams back with a score and a brief comment scrawled in red at the top:

98  great job!
87  good -- just needed more Biblical examples
70  what happened?? see me

Commenting in personalized detail on 40 blue-book exams is not feasible for most teachers. But it is quite possible to make up a master sheet that explains what knowledge and skills the exam was testing, identifies specific content that was sought, and gives instructive examples of various ways in which successful exam-takers approached specific questions.