

Sample Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Mountains are my teachers. They exact deep lessons. Recently, I climbed Aconcagua, the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere. In reflecting on that experience, I wrote these words:

Hardship. That's life at extreme altitude. Vision. Views from high places. Stark understanding. Rising above. Seeing nothing higher. Seeing in new ways. This is what makes the hardship both bearable and worth it. Seeing and then coming down having seen. Pushing through. Giving up comfort. Working with my mind. Finding small pockets of fun and absurdity and laughter and connection. Seeing the morning light dance circles. Watching the evening sun drain from the hills. Sinking into a rich rhythm of physical exertion and mental stamina. Learning the lessons that come from days and days of outdoor living, the whispers of the stars, and the drone of the wind.

I teach my students like the mountains teach me. With vision. With struggle. Asking them to reach up and out and to reach for an unknown sky. To learn while filled with uncertainty and sometimes with joy and mirth. I ask for mindful engagement always – to climb or teach or learn without focus leads to unwelcome consequences.

Mountains are both solid and moving. They are steady, wise, and seemingly unyielding while at the same time they are changing through erosion and time. As a teacher, I seek to provide a solid presence for my students. I am reliable, accessible, and my students come to know they can depend on me both inside and outside the classroom. I also move and change. I reflect on my life experiences and bring change to who and how I am which in turn, shifts how I teach. I teach differently over time and season, continuously trying to improve my ability to facilitate student learning.

Mountains are both demanding and compassionate. The obstacles to their lofty peaks are many and danger lurks for even the most prepared mountaineer. Amid the perils, however, shelter, beauty, and meaning can be found. I am a demanding teacher. I have and communicate high expectations for my students. I want them to work hard, engage deeply, and explore new ground. This level of expectation can feel dangerous to students as I ask them to learn in ways less familiar to them. I frame courses as journeys of learning and provide opportunities and activities that encourage the development of community within the class. I strive to create an atmosphere of kindness, compassion, and understanding that provides a belay. This foundation of care and respect offers a safety line allowing students to take greater emotional and intellectual risks.

Mountains are both journey and destination. They summon us to climb their slopes, explore their canyons, and attempt their summits. The summit, despite months of preparation and toil, is never guaranteed though tastes of sweet nectar when reached. If my only goal as a teacher and mountaineer is the summit, I risk cruel failure if I do not reach the highest apex. Instead, if I accept the mountain's invitation to journey and create meaning in each step, success is manifest

in every moment. As a teacher, I seek to balance “the view” and “the footsteps.” Without the view, my students and I are lost. Without the footsteps, we don’t move from where we began. I create a flow in my teaching that seeks the summit, the learning objectives for each course, and which honours the journey, the experiences and learning along the climb to it.

Mountains are both mirror and void. The brilliant white flanks reflect the blazing sun magnifying its power to illuminate. The dark recesses of crevasses absorb sound and light leaving a quiet potential space. As a teacher, I offer students the paradoxes of light and dark, of reflection and absorption, of heights and depths. I offer my entire self by sharing my life process on my website. I allow students to see me as fully human, fully fallible, fully engaged. I actively facilitate reflective processing of experience in my classes. I hold up a metaphorical mirror that allows students to glimpse themselves in new or different ways. I also become a sounding board who can listen and absorb their pain, confusion, or loss.

Richard Bach in *Illusions* said, “I teach best what I most need to learn.” It was a sentence that stopped me cold when I first read it as a 20 year old undergraduate and has been my constant companion throughout my teaching career. In recent years, mountains have taught me so much and so, in turn, I seek to teach like the mountain, sharing both the high summits and deep valleys with students in my classroom.