

My Teaching Philosophy

I have a great deal of difficulty even writing down these words. It seems to me that stating I have a philosophy implies that teaching is an end in itself—which it isn't—or that teaching can be performed as an isolated function—which it cannot. The problem with teaching is that it is simply one step in what happens to someone else, and even then, only sometimes.

Let me start with a word like "instruction." Providing instruction is a skill. This is a much easier term for me because, in my mind, it allows a certain degree of independence from the person receiving the instruction. I, like the Canadian Army, believe there are six principles of instruction:

- 1. Interest:** The target audience must be interested in what is being presented, and the presentation must be delivered in an engaging manner so that the trainer maintains the group's attention and goodwill.
- 2. Comprehension:** The subject matter must be presented so that it is comprehensible to the target audience. In a nutshell, this implies that the information must be at or below the audience's current level of understanding. New ideas must be related to familiar concepts.
- 3. Emphasis:** While we all tend to believe that everything we say is important, it is crucial to emphasize the main points of any presentation so that individuals can properly structure and retain the information.
- 4. Participation:** The audience must participate in the presentation. This might be achieved by asking questions, practicing a skill, or interacting with the material.
- 5. Accomplishment:** The audience must leave the presentation with a sense that they know something more than when they first arrived—whether that is a newfound skill or insight into a specific problem.
- 6. Confirmation:** The presenter must gauge what the audience is taking away from the presentation. This may be evaluated through formal testing or through informal methods such as questioning or conversation.

These six principles form the acronym ICEPAC, and they have served as a fundamental guide to how I approach instruction since I learned them more than twenty years ago. If you apply them, are coached while using them, and truly believe in them, you will become an effective instructor. You will be able to present information clearly and structure an environment that promotes learning.

Let me now return to the concept of "teaching." Teaching has only occurred if learning has taken place. Unfortunately, as an instructor, I can only measure my success as a teacher by what my students have learned. If they learn nothing, I have taught nothing.

What I find particularly fascinating is the apparent ability of students to learn from almost nothing. For example, I currently supervise three graduate students who receive no formal instruction from me—and very little else—yet, based on what they say and do, they appear to learn. Does this reflect my teaching philosophy, or do they simply learn despite my best efforts?

Something I find particularly disturbing is the lack of interaction with students due to the extremely large class sizes instructors are forced to manage. In 1999, I found myself lecturing to an audience of 325 first-year computer science students taking their very first course in the subject. Many passed the course, though I am not sure how much of that success had to do with me or my philosophy.

Alexander Ferworn

Winter 2002

Revised Summer 2026