

Teaching Philosophy of Bradley Andrew

Deep and genuine care for the well-being and success of a student, both in and outside the classroom, is the most important aspect of teaching. Forcefulness and obligation may push people to achieve some, but it is devotion, care, and kindness that inspire them to move mountains. Teaching, in its purest essence, is a connection between people for the growth of knowledge. Students will always excel and respond better to a teacher who makes attempts to connect with them. Studies have shown this, but we all intuitively know that we tend to listen more to a close friend or family member than to someone we know little about, even if the latter presents a more logical argument. I always work to establish trust, empathy, and joy with every student I teach. Secondary to this is enthusiasm and love for what is being taught. A student will rarely feel motivation or desire to learn a topic if their teacher shows little passion or interest in it. I have always enjoyed learning and find pure joy in discovering the abstract world of mathematics and how it models the physical world. I always do my best to spark a similar desire in my students, even if only a small flame.

Building these connections with students and fostering their curiosity starts with small, practical steps. Remembering a person's name as quickly as possible to show they matter to you is one of the first steps. Learning about the individual—their interests, goals, background, and motivations—is the next important step, as it helps you determine how best to assist their learning. Since every student is unique, a good teacher must find unique solutions for students who need extra support. Another practical tactic I often employ is one of the oldest pillars of pedagogy: asking questions to prompt a student towards understanding. Learning is self-growth, and nobody grows when all the work is done by someone else.

Over the years, I've seen firsthand how this approach transforms students. During my first year as a graduate student at Auburn, I saw how much a Teaching Assistant's care for students could make a difference. A few other TAs and I decided, about a month into the semester, to ask the professors overseeing the algebra-based Physics 1 course if we could implement "Free Point Friday." This was a program where students could come into the lab room on Fridays to work with TAs on any physics-related problems or concepts. As long as they demonstrated a desire to improve and left with a better understanding of the topic, we would sign off on their work, and they would receive extra credit. This initiative was done without any additional incentive from the department or professors—it was purely because we wanted to see the students succeed in their course and college careers.

Fortunately, we had the foresight to track all the students who attended Free Point Friday throughout the semester. This data, along with coursework, grades, and personal accounts, led to a Physics Pedagogy paper in the department, which demonstrated the significant success of the program and its positive impact on students. While working on extra problems and having more practice certainly contributed, I firmly believe that the care and dedication we TAs showed were the primary reasons for the increased performance. This initiative, along with positive feedback from students, earned me the Outstanding TA Award that year. Although I have been a Research Assistant since then, I always find time to tutor on the side and continue doing everything I can to help students succeed in any way they may need.