

My Philosophy of Teaching

by Mark Selle, Ph.D.

I believe education is a cooperative art involving the life-long formation of a person's intellect and will for the betterment of the person and society. My philosophy of teaching rests upon this definition, and what follows expands upon each aspect of it.

A Cooperative Art

I believe teaching is the art most noble because it nurtures unique aspects of the human soul. I take the word *art* not in its common usage meaning *what is produced* but, rather, in the ancient sense signifying the *skills* all of us possess to be both artist and medium.

Education is *an art* because it embraces each of the three primary types of art: liberal, useful, and fine. The liberal arts traditionally included grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. The first three, classically called the trivium, we now call the language arts of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and persuading. The latter four, classically called the quadrivium, we now call the scientific arts of observing, estimating, measuring, experimenting, calculating, and problem-solving.

Most of the useful arts are *productive*. Only three are *cooperative*. The three cooperative arts include farming, healing, and teaching. All who deal in growing, medicine, and education practice the cooperative arts. In each, the practitioner works with nature to produce an aspect of living and growing beyond what would result from nature alone. As a teacher, I cooperate with the natural activity of my students' minds to nurture in them the uniquely human characteristics defined by the language arts and the scientific arts.

The fine arts are those in which the work is not a means but an end. Thus, *fine* is Latin, not English, and the sense is more in the English word *final* than *fine*. I believe teaching includes formation of the uniquely human ability to appreciate beauty as an end in itself. Consequently, as a teacher, I help my students appreciate the beauty of learning itself and inspire them to pursue it for their whole lives.

Life-Long Formation

I believe that the purpose of teaching, then, is to prepare students for life-long learning, to help them form the habit of learning and to provide them with the means of doing so long after they graduate. My students cannot become fully educated during their short time with me. Only by encouraging the love of learning to take root in them can I hope to have helped them as a teacher. I must inspire them with the beauty of learning.

Formation of the Intellect and Will

The intellect and will are unique aspects of the human soul. Philosophically, the term soul refers to the life inherent in any living thing. This life is formed, at least in part, by nature. I believe that my role as a teacher, as a cooperative artist, is to influence such formation. Thus, formation, within the context of a teaching philosophy founded on the dignity and freedom of each human person, refers to formation of

an embodied human soul unique in its aspects of intellect and free will. As a teacher, I believe that I should aim at forming knowledge, intellectual skills, and an understanding of ideas and values. I believe that these aims represent the three modes of teaching: didactic, coaching, and Socratic questioning. Through my exercise of these teaching modalities, my students exercise and develop their memories, the skills of learning, and understanding.

Betterment of the Person

The human person is rational and free. Consequently, as a teacher, I aim at forming the intellectual and moral virtues in my students. I help them seek *the true* that their intellects may understand it, *the good* that their wills may choose it, and *the beautiful* that their souls may long for it. The intellectual and moral virtues I seek to form in my students include knowledge, understanding, wisdom, art, prudence, justice, temperance, and courage.

Betterment of Society

The human person is also social. Therefore, as a teacher, I aim at formation of the social virtues in my students. I help them to pursue the *common good*, that each of them may nurture it through family, which is the first school of social virtue, as well as through culture, associations, public and private institutions, government, and the whole of society. The social virtues I seek to develop in my students include friendship, collegiality, good citizenship, active cooperation, civic involvement, social justice, and peace.

Thus we come full circle back to the definition of education that inspires my teaching. Education is a cooperative art involving the life-long formation of a person's intellect and will for the betterment of the person and society. I believe that a great teacher works with the heart and soul of a learner to plant the seeds of intellectual, moral, and social virtue and to instill knowledge, the skills of learning, and a depth of understanding, thereby giving those virtues a chance to grow through a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.