

William S. Lynn, Ph.D.

Teaching Statement

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Teaching is a touchstone of my career. It is a practice that extends beyond the classroom, and includes advising and mentoring long after students have finished a particular course or program of study. I was fortunate to learn from superb professors, and their example is the starting point for my own approach to teaching, advising and mentoring.

Experience

I have been a professor for some years now, most recently at Tufts University where I am the Program Director for the Masters of Science in Animals and Public Policy (MAPP). As such, I have taught a wide range of graduate and undergraduate courses – surveys, topics, methods, research design, theory, and advanced seminars.¹ My experiences at Green Mountain College and Tufts have been particularly rich in these regards.

Green Mountain College is a liberal arts college with an innovative curriculum focused on the environment. I was a professor in the Environmental Studies program, and it was there I earned the ‘Most Inspiring Professor’ award from the students of the honors program. Tufts is one of the ‘new ivies’, and our MAPP program is the leader in the interdisciplinary field of human-animal studies. Think of the later as kin to environmental studies, with a focus on wild and domestic animals.

In between Green Mountain College and Tufts, I was a research scholar in non-profit think tanks, and an independent consultant on ethical issues in environmental policy. This experience complemented that of the academy, with a focus on grant writing, guest lectures, educational workshops, expert testimony, radio and television interviews, media advice and research reports.

Complementing the above is my experience as an advisor and mentor. As a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, I was Coordinator of Undergraduate Advising for Geography, as well as Assistant to the Director for the Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership. In these roles I advised bachelors and masters students, and developed curricular guidelines and coursework. At Green Mountain College, I advised students on academic requirements, internships, directed research and job opportunities. At Tufts I am the advisor for all the graduate students in MAPP, and mentor many others in their subsequent careers. I also sit on the doctoral dissertation committees of students from other institutions who require my expertise.

Philosophy of Education

At both the graduate and undergraduate levels, I am committed to teaching in a manner that meets the highest standards of education. Following Socrates, I see the role of educator as gadfly and midwife. As gadflies we prod each other to critically reflect on our prior understandings. As midwives we facilitate one another’s personal and intellectual development. I say ‘we’ because this is

¹ For a list of these courses see my curriculum vita. Sample syllabi and evaluations from my graduate and undergraduate courses are also available. Visit www.practicaethics.net, select the Teaching menu, and download the document of your choice.

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a process of dialogue and mutual disclosure that transcends one's formal role as a professor or student.

In the same vein, I am committed to higher education as a means of freeing people from uncritical belief and unreflective behaviour. By developing capacities for authentic self-expression, critical thinking, ethical discernment and self-governing actions, I help empower others to reflect and act for themselves, to discriminate between better or worse accounts of the world, and to deliberate democratically about the ends and means for the common good. This is a goal that is especially relevant to a diversifying society in a globalizing world – a world of cultural contrasts, political conflict, economic inequality, environmental degradation, war and terror. Taking this approach has also made my teaching a personally rewarding experience. Teaching not only hones the capacities of my students, it also challenges and refines my own insights and capabilities.

Pedagogy

Emphasizing critical thinking, methodological rigour and theoretical sophistication, I strive to facilitate the scientific and ethical development of students. My pedagogy combines dialogic presentations, active learning, objective testing, reflective writing, and research projects. I set rigorous standards and expectations by requiring attendance at all lectures, assigning a substantial reading load, insisting on complete preparation before class sessions, and frequently evaluating student work and progress.

I use seminar-style presentations and small group activities to create a classroom environment with extensive opportunities for interaction and discussion. My training in meeting facilitation is very helpful in this regard. With respect to individual students, I function as an intellectual coach, motivating them to achieve their personal best, exceed prior horizons of understanding, and internalize knowledge in a way that continues to inform their lives after they finish their coursework. Altogether, I find this approach promotes a high degree of personal commitment and self-respect in my students. And that results in the overall high quality of their work in my courses.

Coda: A Personal Story

I have a personal story that lies at the heart of why I take teaching so seriously and enjoy it so much!

My little scandal is that I dropped out of the University of Minnesota as an undergraduate. I was a messed up kid working through family issues, and I did not make my education or myself a priority. Afterwards, I puttered around with finishing but never made a commitment. And then something remarkable happened. A professor I admired had kept an eye out for me. One day, he pulled me aside as we passed on the campus bridge over the Mississippi. He said, 'Come back. The world needs committed people with talent'.

I was a tad shocked. Dropping out is not much of a confidence builder. Yet here was one of the world's most admired scholars and he saw something more.

So I became what Stuart Jamieson refers to as a 'school boy'. One of many kids without prospects whose life was redirected by the dedication of a few professors. It was Mulford Sibley (Political Science) who was the first to help me put my academic life in order. He was followed by other professors who had an equally profound impact on me – Robert Ross (Religious Studies), Terry Ball (Political Science), Roger Miller, Eric Sheppard, Helga Leitner and Fred Lukerman (all in Geography), and Mary Midgley (Philosophy).

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One of their many influences was their dedication to teaching. Here I mean teaching broadly understood as instructing, mentoring and advising. They modeled excellence, and through their example taught me the value of teaching. As importantly, they did not pit teaching against research, but conceived of them as mutually reinforcing. They went far beyond the facts of a topic, and taught with theoretical and methodological rigour, weaving together the strands of research, teaching and advising into whole cloth.

Despite their differences, what my professors shared was the practice of academic coaching. They demanded the highest standards of scholarship, and combined that with supportive guidance on how to be a scholar. I could not have been more fortunate.