

# The Educational Philosophy of **CHRISTOPHER R. PELCHAT**

## The best educators fulfill multiple roles within the educational process.

An education is much larger than the sum of faculty/student interaction in the classroom. A student can certainly become "educated" without input from a teacher -- Abraham Lincoln is a notable example. But self-education is very difficult and only the very brightest individuals can adequately accomplish the task. Nearly all of us need teachers to guide our educational quest.

An educator fulfills three broad roles. The first is planner, the second is teacher, and the third is evaluator.

- a) The *planner* determines the specific course rationales and objectives for student outcomes by referring to national/international norms and institutional standards.
- b) The *teacher* makes the student's task of becoming educated (fulfilling the course objectives) easier by facilitating and motivating the learning process. Teachers should serve as primary sources of information in one or more of the areas in which they teach (i.e., they should be scholars), as well as guides to the larger spectrum of educational resources. Intellectual and personal maturity is particularly important, as are a broad range of educational and personal experiences.
- c) The *evaluator* judges the extent to which the student has met the course objectives, and assigns a grade. Competitive or "curve" grading is inappropriate. Grades should be assigned in relation to the degree that students have met the course objectives. If every student has completely met the objectives, then every student should get an A; if none of the students have met the objectives, then none should get A. The evaluator should be rigorous and thorough, but also fair. Expectations outside the course objectives should be avoided.

Often the "teacher" role consumes the greatest part of an educator's energies. I would like to offer a "trail guide" analogy to that role.

There are times in which the guide should be out in front of the hikers, such as when:

- a) The hikers need to get to a particular destination as quickly as possible.
- b) The hikers need to be steered away from the most difficult or dangerous trails until they are ready.
- c) The hikers will likely miss some of the most wonderful vistas and features unless someone points them out.

There are times in which the guide should stay in the office and let the hikers go out by themselves because:

- a) There is a joy in personal discovery. If the hikers can discover a secret waterfall on their own it is more meaningful and memorable than if the guide shows it to them.
- b) Independent hiking skills are among the ultimate goals for hikers. Those skills must be learned and refined through hiking independently.
- c) Re-tracing a trail again and again at the hiker's own speed can provide a mature understanding and appreciation of the trail. The guide is helpful the first time, but may just get in the way the second and third times.

There are times the guide should travel as one of the hikers, relinquishing the role of leader:

- a) When hiking through new territory, with no previous knowledge of the terrain, the guide sometimes lets others lead (but may reclaim the leadership role occasionally to share particular expertise or insight).
- b) When training new guides the old guide should allow them to make some mistakes (such as leading the group around in circles) for the educational value. So long as danger is not threatening, it is better to let the hikers discover and correct their own mistakes.
- c) The guide may gently steer the hikers toward a particular destination, doing so subtly from the rear of the group using nudges and hints. The hikers will experience the wonder and joy of free exploration, yet "miraculously" arrive at camp right on time.

In the educational process, the teacher is the "trail guide." Sometimes a teacher should be "front and center," controlling and directing the learning process. But often the teacher should play a less dictatorial role in the learning process, allowing the students more roles in constructing their education.

**The best educators strive not only to develop and refine strengths but to correct and/or avoid weaknesses.**

Often a few negative factors in a teacher's presentation or personal approach can counterbalance a handful of positives. A professor with several negative factors can be rendered almost completely ineffective in the classroom regardless of other professional strengths. Included among such problems are the following: short temper, rudeness, profanity, physical abuse of students, continual lateness to class, continual lack of preparedness, snobbishness or pretentiousness, tendency to bully or ridicule students, tendency to follow inappropriate tangents, favoritism, distracting personal mannerisms, speaking too loud/soft/fast/slow, inflexibility, sexism, racism, obsessiveness/compulsiveness, inappropriate or unreasonable expectations, and immoral behavior outside the classroom.

Educators often fail to recognize these weaknesses in themselves. If peer and student evaluators are "too polite to mention it," the problems may persist for years.

**The best educators use a careful mixture of summative and formative approaches.**

I have taken the terms "summative" and "formative," which normally refer to types of testing, and expanded their implications to encompass broad approaches to teaching. In a summative approach passing the test is the goal; learning opportunities are provided to help the student meet that goal. Since the emphasis is on *proving* something, the *validity* of the test is very important to the teacher. In a formative approach learning is the goal; testing opportunities are provided to help the student meet that goal. Since the emphasis is on *improving* something, the *effectiveness* of the test in motivating learning is what is most important to the teacher.

In trying to understand the implications of these differing approaches, I have developed some comparative observations which are given below.

**Mistakes.** In the *formative* approach, a mistake is a good thing: it opens the door to a question in the student's mind, and a question opens the door to an answer. A mistake represents progress: students do their best learning from mistakes (their own and others'). But in the *summative* approach, a mistake is a setback, a failure, an embarrassment.

**Class Attendance.** To require class attendance is a *formative* approach: it is a mistake for the student to miss class, and the professor tries to discourage such errors quickly before they become compounded. Class sessions provide all sorts of learning activities, including learning from other students. Test results document only a small amount of the learning which actually goes on; the notion that "as long as you can pass the test you needn't come to class" is unacceptable within the *formative* approach. The *summative* approach is not to require attendance: it may still be a mistake for the student to miss class, but the teacher first and foremost wants students to prove themselves as in, "You are all adults now - prove it".

**Cooperation.** The *formative* approach promotes education as a cooperative adventure, with instructor and student working as a teaching/learning team to get the job done. The instructor feels a personal responsibility for a student's performance as in, "We failed". The *summative* approach to education is more confrontational, with the instructor setting up barriers for students to overcome. The instructor sees the responsibility as the student's as in, "You failed".

**Mastery.** In the *formative* approach the instructor will ask the question, "What can I do that will help the greatest number of students to master the subject?" In the *summative* approach the instructor will ask the question, "What can I do to ensure that only students who have mastered the subject can pass my test?"

**Exclusiveness.** Some instructors, departments, and institutions use "redemptive" mechanisms to insure that every interested student is given the opportunity to learn and succeed -- this represents the *formative* approach. Some instructors, departments, and institutions use "filtering" mechanisms to insure that only the most qualified students can get in or continue past a certain level -- this represents the *summative* approach. Some professors would prefer this kind of approach, in which students go through an interview process, submit one or more essays, provide letters of recommendation, meet a much higher GPA or ACT requirement, etc., and only the very top students would be admitted.

Time Frame. Taken to its extreme, the *formative* approach would expand to infinity the time allowed for completing the objectives of a course. The students would review materials a thousand times if needed, retake the exam a thousand times if needed, and never receive a final grade (because they might do better next time). On the other hand, taken to its extreme, the *summative* approach would dispense with teaching activities entirely and proceed with a grand comprehensive exam.

Obviously, neither extreme is appropriate for good college teaching. I believe a combination of the two is necessary, though I admit that my personal preference gives more weight to the formative approach. The professor should follow a formative approach by responding kindly to student errors, giving occasional low-impact quizzes, reviewing material thoroughly with the class before exams, returning exam papers promptly and reviewing them with the class, allowing students to keep exam papers for future review and study, re-administering examinations on occasion, etc.

But finally, in accord with the summative approach, a unit, a course, or a college career must all have "bottom lines." The teacher must come to the point of saying, "I have helped you all I can. We are now past the time to *improve*; you must *prove*."

### **The best educators strive for balance in course substance.**

Much has been said over the years about *informational content* versus *thinking/learning process*. I believe there are six categories of learning substance instead of just those two.

Here is how I define them:

#### A. Cognitive Development

##### 1) Factual Knowledge

The systematic acquisition of factual knowledge -- an emphasis on informational content -- is the most traditional aspect of education and remains vital today. Factual knowledge should be both of a broad and general nature as well as in highly specialized areas. Drill and rote memorization have been vilified in recent years, yet in many instances they remain the fastest and most effective methods for this type of learning. I believe that broad-ranging "Cultural Literacy" as defined by E. D. Hirsch and others has been seriously neglected by educators in recent years, to the severe detriment of America's students.

##### 2) Thinking/Learning Skills

This category currently receives great emphasis in many educational circles. The emphasis here is on process. The refinement of skills in critical/creative thinking and problem solving are at the heart of this approach. There is emphasis is on "learning how to learn." Again, as above, these skills should be both broadly generalized as well as narrowly specific within chosen disciplines.

##### 3) Insights, Concepts, Relationships, Applications

Understanding and utilization should be the ultimate goal of cognitive development, resulting from and building upon the knowledge and skills (from categories a1 and a2, above) which have been learned and refined.

## B. Personal Development

### 1) Self-Oriented Knowledge and Skills

This includes self-esteem, self-confidence, self-discipline, self-expression, responsibility, personal motivation, intellectual curiosity, wide-ranging interests, ability to handle pressure, healthy lifestyle, and specialized physical skills (e.g., swimming, typing, guitar, kayaking).

### 2) Socially-Oriented Knowledge and Skills

This includes cooperation, leadership, communication, and social-relationship skills. The ability to relate to other people is vital, and during the college years students will make life-long personal connections.

### 3) Character and Values

This category emerges from the summation of "self" and "socialization," the two previous categories. The development of character includes virtues such as compassion, tolerance, loyalty, courage, and perseverance. Spiritual and ethical values must be developed.

I believe the categories above are like "basic food groups". An adequate education will include a balance in emphasis among them. Historically, there has been a tendency to concentrate attention on one or two of the categories and ignore the others, assuming that they will follow automatically. Some individuals have proclaimed that if we can just help Johnny to be happy and have a positive self-image, then everything else will take care of itself. Others have proclaimed that if we can just help Johnny develop good thinking skills, everything else will take care of itself. Still others believe that if we can help Johnny learn a large quantity of factual information, everything else will take care of itself. These approaches have not worked; everything else has not "taken care of itself," and distortions in the educational process have resulted. It seems apparent that we must give more attention to educating the whole student, not just a part. It is not necessary that every course or activity fully cover every one of the categories, but an adequate educational experience, taken as a whole, should address them all.

Concerns/problems regarding Factual Knowledge (category a1): There is a "surfeit of knowledge" -- it is impossible to learn everything. The body of total human knowledge is constantly changing, with additions and corrections being made continuously. Therefore, it should be understood that facts chosen to be learned must be foundational and/or representational, and that a life-long process of "upgrading" is necessary. Factual knowledge is easily tested, and thus may receive inordinate emphasis in examinations.

Concerns/problems regarding Thinking/Learning Skills (category a2): A tendency within this approach is to "reinvent the wheel" every semester. That can be a valuable exercise, but it is not very time-effective. Taken to its extreme, this approach tends towards shallowness and subjectivism (e.g., what the student *thinks* about history or ecology becomes more important than the facts). Thinking/learning skills are not as easy to test as factual information, so a professor must commit more time and effort to creating and grading such questions.

Concerns/problems regarding Insights (category a3): Some professors get bogged down in content or process and never reach this category. Students may learn a lot of "what's" or "how's" but not enough "why's." Other professors move to this category prematurely, skipping quickly over content and process, assuming that those things have been covered elsewhere or that the student can master them without assistance. This type of knowledge is best tested through subjective instruments, and may be difficult to grade.

Concerns/problems regarding categories b1 and b2: Over-emphasis on Self- and Socially-Oriented Knowledge and Skills (at the expense of cognitive development) is likely to produce personable, popular, seemingly well-rounded students who do not know very much about anything in particular.

Concerns/problems regarding Character and Values (category b3): Students and their professors sometimes get bogged down in the development of self- and socialization-skills and never reach this category. Students learn a lot of "what's" or "how's" but not enough "why's." Other students and professors sometimes try to reach Character and Values prematurely, skipping quickly over self and socialization, assuming that they have been developed elsewhere or that the student can master them without assistance. All the categories within the broad Personal Development category are hard to test, and therefore may receive less emphasis (particularly within a summative approach).

I like to make an analogy to operating an airplane: fueling alternates with flying. Accumulating factual knowledge is the way human beings store intellectual fuel. Often we don't fully understand the factual knowledge that we accumulate (consider a young child), at least not at that moment. When we begin to actually apply the knowledge -- the flying part of the analogy -- true understanding comes. Unfortunately, we educators tend to emphasize one extreme or the other: all fueling or all flying. With the former approach the student becomes overloaded with "useless" information and is immobilized. With the latter approach the student attempts to make application of an insufficient body of knowledge; flying without enough fuel the plane comes crashing down.

In summary, I do not agree with the common idea that the first two years of the college experience should concentrate on information and the last two concentrate on application. I believe that integration and balance among these and the other categories should be a goal at every level (and to some degree in every course).

**The best educators are concerned with efficiency and effectiveness.**

*Efficient* teaching/learning involves meeting all the course objectives with the least effort and in the least amount of time. No student wants to take two years to master the basics of algebra if the task can be

accomplished in one semester. Efficient teaching involves coming to know the students well: their perspectives, strengths, and weaknesses. It also involves a carefully planned and executed course content and sequence.

*Effective* teaching involves helping the greatest possible number of students become educated. The two or three brightest students in a class will likely succeed in mastering the course objectives regardless of the teacher's performance. The effective educator is the one who can motivate and guide a *large proportion* of the students to meet the course objectives (however, if 100% of the students meet the objectives I would suspect that the "planner" aimed the course objectives too low).

Some teachers believe that they are obligated to make the course purposely "tough," but I believe the opposite is true. While I would certainly agree that achieving an education is "tough," the efficient and effective educator *facilitates* education, that is, makes it easier.

### **The best educators avoid lecture as their primary instructional technique.**

Pure lecture, in which the professor reads or talks the entire period while the students take notes furiously, is one of the least effective methods of curricular presentation. Lecture is an information-delivery system which was important and necessary hundreds of years ago when books were scarce. But today when books and photocopy machines are readily available I see little value in routine use of the lecture approach. It is not only inefficient as an information-delivery system; it demeans students for the professor to read to them what they could read for themselves. Furthermore, even if lecture were the very best information-delivery system, factual knowledge would still be all that the students gained, resulting in an incomplete education as described in the best educators strive for balance in course substance section above

An over-dependence on lecture may be the result of:

- 1) Poor planning or preparation -- often caused by a shortage of time in the professor's schedule (ideally, if the instructor's notes are important they should be organized, typed, and distributed),
- 2) An inappropriate emphasis on auxiliary skills (if extraordinary note-taking skill is expected, it should be listed as a course objective and taught specifically),
- 3) Faculty showmanship (the instructor may savor the role of entertainer or enjoy showing off superior intellect and knowledge),
- 4) Tradition (this is how the faculty member was taught, and he has never considered alternative methods).

### **The best educators stress the importance of long-term and intuitive-level learning.**

There are perhaps four levels of memory/learning. The first, working memory enables us to remember a phone number just long enough to dial it or to remember a person's name just long enough to say "hi." The second, short-term memory lasts for several days up to a week, just long enough to cram for a test then

forget everything afterward. The third, long-term memory, is permanent, but requires a moment to summon and focus the recollection. The fourth, intuitive memory includes those memories which are so strong that no pause for recollection is necessary (a child's recognition of her mother's voice would be an example).

Short-term learning, as the result of "cramming," may carry the student through a unit test but if nothing is retained after that then it was a useless exercise. The most significant factor in achieving long-term or intuitive learning is reinforcement; important facts, skills, and concepts should be reviewed again and again. The professor must be careful to choose only the most important factual knowledge to be mastered since few people are capable of retaining great quantities of abstract information. The more insight, sense of relationship, and understanding of application that students have developed, the more factual knowledge they will be able to retain permanently.

Forgetfulness is normal, but it is wrong to give in to it by declaring, as some have, that "an education is what's left after you have forgotten everything you learned." Education is not something that one "gets" by age 22, then "has" for the rest of his/her life; it's something that he/she must "do" forever. There is a lifelong battle between learning and forgetting; a continuing process of education and re-education is all that stands between humanity and utter ignorance.

### **The best educators are careful to differentiate between fact and opinion.**

The instructor's opinion may be very valuable, but it must not be portrayed as fact. Students should be encouraged to form and express opinions, even when they conflict with the instructor's. When in the classroom the professor asks for a student's opinion, that opinion should be treated delicately if the professor hopes to ever hear another genuine opinion from that or any student. An important goal of education is to direct students into independent thought rather than just train them to parrot back the professor's opinions. Educators should not respond "that's wrong" to a student's opinion, regardless of how misguided it might be. It is better to ask the student to support the opinion with facts, and then dispute the facts. It is better to respond, "I disagree. In my opinion...."

Educators should sometimes keep their opinions to themselves. A complex opinion might be misunderstood or might divert attention from the issues at hand. Educators should not feel obligated to impose their opinions on those around them or to "correct" everyone with whom they happen to disagree. The practice of withholding opinions at those times when stating them would be inappropriate is not deceptive or cowardly, it is a mark of good self control.

### **The best educators are joyful learners.**

The ideal professor has a broad interest in learning and in the world. She is interested in *everything*, not just a narrow specialty within her major discipline. He is first and foremost a learner, excited with learning, and able to share that excitement with students. The best educators let students see them in a learner mode, where they do not know everything, but are eager to find out.

The best educators treat learning as an exciting adventure, not a solemn duty. No student is required to be in a particular class or program of study, and an approach which depends on solemn duty (and therefore guilt) for student motivation will soon find a near-empty classroom. Students today cannot be bullied into accepting obligation/responsibility to the professor, college, discipline, nation, or world. If they are to take on those kinds of obligations they must do so freely and willingly, and not be shamed or pressured into it.

A teacher who is a joyful learner will inspire the students to be joyful learners as well.

**The best educators do not always have the best credentials.**

The most effective and engaging teachers may or may not be the ones who have taught the longest, done the most for the institution, or possess the most scholarly credentials. Although those things are important, they do not guarantee a good educator.