

Statement of Teaching Philosophy **ROBEN TOROSYAN, PH.D.**

I teach both to change the world and to transform myself. Whether consulting with students or faculty, my goal is to help people think critically and take responsible action in personal, professional and civic life. I believe the aim of education should therefore be human development—the growth of the capacity to think and take action with ever-greater creativity and complexity.

To foster this development, I use a variety of active learning methods with one theme in common: All give practice at both reflecting on reasoning and experimenting with different ways of doing things. For example, one of my favorite exercises with faculty and students alike uses a “structured controversy.” I locate a controversial issue about which members disagree and divide the group accordingly—pro and con. Each of the two groups expresses its views, but unlike in most debates, each listener must paraphrase or say back the other’s points to the other’s satisfaction. Often in the process, when one side summarizes another, they get corrected, sometimes several times, “Well that’s not quite it; almost, but you’re missing this.” By the end, some participants gain greater respect for opposing arguments, question some of their own assumptions, and sensitize themselves to nuances of understanding. When students participate, they often begin to move from thinking in polarities to taking context and circumstance into account, in this case testing how well they have understood others rather than assuming an idealized transparency.

Most people, however, change their habits of thinking and acting only very slowly and gradually, in an often painful, iterative process of progress and regress—as demonstrated by much theory and research in learning and development. To support people as they encounter their challenges, I place great emphasis on creating an environment of trust and empathy—in the classroom with students, and in workshops with faculty. Two ways to build such trust are to validate students’ feelings as they are challenged, and to show them that I too face challenges and continue to learn from my mistakes.

One of my most fruitful teaching mistakes occurred when a student protested that the structured controversy exercise was “unnatural, stupid, and we don’t need it.” At the time, I simply moved on to other student comments, largely ignoring the protest, as I was a new instructor, fearing my authority was being challenged. Upon later reflection, I realized I should have stopped and commented, “What a good point, active listening feels very awkward, especially when we first do it. You also make me realize that I often assume that people should necessarily welcome new experiences like this. I should question that assumption.” I realized from this oversight that a “resistant” comment, instead of being avoided, could be highlighted directly, and thus provide an opportunity to model critical reflection and empathy for the struggles vital to learning.

What I find is often missing in faculty development is a focus on how to handle the unpredictability of events during classroom discussion. Having learned from the above

incident, I responded differently in a subsequent workshop at Columbia. Some faculty participants, when asked to share their opinions on a deeply personal issue, said they were not comfortable doing so publicly. This time, rather than either imploring or ignoring, I thanked them for saying so and asked how many others shared their concern. Finding a good split of opinions in the room, I suggested we shift and use that very issue instead of my originally planned one, and people agreed. After the workshop, several participants remarked that my willingness to veer from my plan earned their trust, showing them I cared more about them than my method. I learned that such live group dynamics often provide the most teachable moments, as they allow the instructor to demonstrate a learning mode of self-examination.

I design assignments to tap intrinsic motivation and propel further inquiry. For instance, one writing task requires students to formulate one hundred questions, based solely on their own curiosity, about anything they wish. Later they identify themes across questions, and draw connections to problems in an academic discipline. For many, such assignments tap learner interests and drive later independent research. To make assessment ongoing, varied and relevant to students, I use modified learning contracts. Students evaluate their own work based on mutually agreed upon criteria including clarity of written expression, complexity of idea and argument, and exploration of opposing points of view.

Vital too is my assessment of my own effectiveness. I collect blind feedback from students, after the first class and every few weeks thereafter, asking them to write what actions or moments they found most “engaging,” “distancing,” or “surprising” in a session. The next class, I report back themes and share my thoughts and, if appropriate, any changes I will make. I also have had colleagues observe me teaching and critique my assignments and syllabi, to refine my approach. Most powerfully, I have reviewed my own teaching videotapes, transcribed portions and qualitatively analyzed key behaviors through my scholarly research and writing.

Such objective data, the hard facts and results of my teaching, are a true, if often challenging, gift. Those moments—when I discover how I have helped others but also find myself transformed and provoked to further thought and learning—are what sustain my endless fascination with teaching. The dynamics make the process like an ongoing gardening experiment, where I am forced to modify my methods continuously, investigating just what different conditions are needed for different kinds of growing beings to flourish. Thankfully, the challenge never ends.