

## **Teaching Philosophy – “A Therapeutic Analogy”**

Mitchell M. Handelsman  
Professor of Psychology  
University of Colorado Denver

I was trained as a psychotherapist, and my philosophy is based on the assumption that the principles of good therapy also underlie good teaching. Although it is clear that teaching is *not* therapy, the two activities share enough similarities that a therapeutic analogy can serve as a framework with which to understand and practice the art of teaching.

Psychotherapy and teaching both encompass a wide variety of behaviors. However, they can both be defined broadly as an exchange of information, primarily verbal, between one person in an expert or authority position, and one or more persons in need of some change. The exchange of information and effort results in an increase in skills and knowledge in those people coming to receive a service, and some satisfaction for those providing the service. According to this definition, therapy may be considered a special type of education, wherein the knowledge and skills to be gained are much more personal.

### **Teaching, Like Therapy, is a Pragmatic Enterprise**

Psychotherapy is aimed at producing change. It is not the blind application of disembodied techniques, nor is it a forum for the glorification of a particular theory or therapist. Likewise, teaching is more than spouting information, thinking up a series of interesting discussion topics, or gaining adoration or converts. Rather, it is the fulfillment of a contract I have with students (including advisees and others who are not enrolled in class) to use my expertise in their interests. Thus, my first step in preparing a class, workshop, or other teaching relationship is to start at the endpoint: How do I want my students to be different as a result of this interaction? It is only in this context that other types of questions become relevant: For example, What should I teach? How should I approach my students and the material? What should I require?

In this approach, technique becomes both less important and more important. It is less important because it is not the content of teaching. It is more important because the specific techniques I use in class and with students are the means of achieving goals, and must be assessed using stringent criteria.

An implication of this approach is my need to know with whom I am working: their level, goals, “stories.” Below, I discuss my need to be open to students’ agendas and their points of view.

### **Teaching, Like Therapy, Requires Personal Involvement**

Although there are many forms of therapy (e.g., psychoanalytic, client-centered, behavioral, family systems), research suggests that there are a few variables that predict successful outcome in all therapies. These variables concern the attitudes that therapists have and convey to their clients: Carl Rogers named them *genuineness*, *unconditional positive regard*, and *accurate empathy*.

*Genuineness* refers to the ability to be open to, and comfortable with, one’s own feelings and reactions in a relationship, and the ability to share oneself with others in a beneficial way. What do I bring—as a person—to this enterprise? (If nothing, then students could get what they need from books, the internet, movies, etc.) The first quality seems to be the most common among the people who have written about teaching: enthusiasm. I can use my feelings and reactions to assess what’s happening with my students—if my enthusiasm is waning, chances are students are burning out also. At these times I cannot blame my students; rather, I need to regain my own passion and concern for my material, for the process, and for students.

Another quality I need to be in touch with is my willingness to learn: keeping current, doing research, modeling that learning is ongoing. I must display the same openness to diverse views and new information as I am trying to cultivate in my students. I must be comfortable admitting when I don’t know something.

*Unconditional positive regard* is the acceptance and prizing of a client or student. Students come with a variety of agendas and motivations. Some of them fit with my own idealistic notions of education (wanting to learn everything) and some do not (wanting to get the course over with). These latter students are just as human as I, and deserve my full efforts to provide the services they are paying for. This attitude allows me to establish emotional contact.

An important way to communicate acceptance is through *empathy*, which refers to a knowing and communicating how clients or students view the world. My awareness of students’ values, views, and experiences increases their engagement and helps me structure learning experiences that are meaningful to them.

## Teachers, Like Therapists, Are Bound by Ethical Obligations

Therapists are bound by codes of professional ethics, given their fiduciary relationships with clients. Teachers are also in a position of trust relative to students, and must take care not to abuse or exploit that trust. Here are some of the most important principles.

**Respect.** Respect for persons is the most important ethical principle in both therapy and teaching, from which other principles can be derived. Students' deficits in knowledge and skill do not lower their dignity. A respectful relationship produces education—not data, degrees, or expertise.

One practical implication of the principle of respect is the avoidance of adversarial relationships with students. The principle of respect also leads to the rules of fidelity and veracity—keeping promises and telling the truth. I need to give students appropriate and timely feedback, to write letters of recommendation that are honest and prompt, and to deliver on my promises.

**Informed Consent.** Therapy and teaching both involve a contract, either explicit or implied. Everybody is happier when the contract is clear and is based on accurate and complete information. The major implication of this principle is the importance of the syllabus. It must be complete, accurate, informative, and promptly distributed. Grading criteria need to be clear, and there must be good reason and adequate notice for assignments to be changed.

**Beneficence and Nonmaleficence.** Do good. Avoid harm. The following questions stem from the principles of nonmaleficence and beneficence: Am I prepared to teach a particular class? Am I doing a particular exercise or technique for sound pedagogical reasons, or for my own convenience (of course, these two considerations are not necessarily mutually exclusive)? Am I exploiting my students (sexually, financially, emotionally, etc.)? Am I giving my research assistants enough of an opportunity to learn from what they are doing? Are my jokes offensive to some group of students? Am I giving students timely feedback about their performance? Is my performance giving all of academia a bad name?

**Justice.** Aristotle said to treat equals equally, and to treat unequals unequally in proportion to their inequality. If I treat students unequally it must be along ethically relevant dimensions (e.g., performance on tests) and not along irrelevant dimensions (e.g., physical attractiveness). Important implications: How do I allot my time? Are my greetings equally friendly for students coming in to argue a grade and to discuss a research idea? Is my grading based on relevant aspects of performance?

***Privacy and Confidentiality.*** Confidentiality is a cornerstone of therapeutic practice, but it is not as prominent in teaching. After all, it is a matter of public record who is enrolled at a university, and anybody can see who comes to class. However, students still deserve to have as much privacy as possible. For me, this means posting grades by code numbers, not gossiping about students with other faculty, and not sharing their products—tests, papers, etc.—with others without students’ consent.

### **Conclusion**

Psychotherapy is not the only useful analogy for teaching. But use of this analogy allows me to consider my teaching activities from different and enriching viewpoints. I believe that teaching comprises relationships and is heavily emotional. Although I must know the material I need to teach and how to convey facts and ideas, I must balance my efforts to accumulate and convey my data, knowledge, and wisdom with an appreciation for the human beings engaging in this process.

There are situations that come up all the time when it is not possible or appropriate to review this entire philosophy. In these circumstances, here is my guiding principle: *What would I do if I were the kind of professor I would like my students to think I am?*

Mitchell M. Handelsman, Ph.D.  
Department of Psychology—Campus Box 173  
University of Colorado Denver  
P.O. Box 173364  
Denver, CO 80217-3364

Phone: 303-315-7045

E-mail: [mitchell.handelsman@ucdenver.edu](mailto:mitchell.handelsman@ucdenver.edu)

Web: <https://clas.ucdenver.edu/handelsman/>

Rev. May 22, 2020