

My Educational Philosophy by Nickolas Hironao Harris

Taking the Long Road to Teaching

When I graduated with a degree in political science nearly two decades ago, my initial impression was that my field of study held little practical value. Since I found employment in the corporate sector, I ended up wishing that I had studied business instead. When I decided to switch careers and become an educator, I was once again given reason to regret having taken the PoliSci route, as work in schools would require that I earn a teaching credential, with no education courses in my background. It was in 2010 that I re-entered the workforce with a freshly issued teaching license in hand.

Ironically, over the course of more than fifteen years in teaching, I've come to recognize that my political science background does in fact inform my thinking as an educator when unpacking the theories and philosophies of this vocation. In fact, I would go as far as to say that there is significant overlap between PoliSci and education, in that the ideologies and core values woven into the former help in analyzing and understanding the key driving forces of educational philosophies.

As a budding political scientist, I was consistently and rigorously challenged to apply critical thinking and critical analysis throughout the process of academic inquiry. The many ways of viewing the world gave me political, social, and economic lenses through which to observe and process what I see. These lenses are the tools that help sort out advantages and disadvantages, so that I can better understand the nuances and intricacies that make up crucial differences.

Take the example of the economic model of Singapore. My inner political scientist pushes me to focus on the clear benefits, but at the same time stops me from simplifying that model by attributing its success to a specific ideology that I might otherwise be tempted to follow blindly. Singapore has achieved economic growth beyond most nations, with GDP per capita rising from roughly \$10,000 in the late 1980s to well over \$80,000 today. Yet there are serious drawbacks. Singapore has struggled to raise the quality of life for those on the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, a festering sore that was laid bare by the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak among the less advantaged.

Applying Critical Thinking to Changes in the Educational Landscape

Similarly, as an educator I work to keep an educational philosophy that responds to changes in the teaching profession while holding on to the values I consider to have timeless importance in the classroom.

As a recent example of how I work through developments in best practices, my experience with standards-based learning comes to mind. I have a thorough understanding of the mechanics of standards-based learning and can appreciate its many strengths, such as the emphasis on a growth mindset, the focus on results over

effort, and the goal of skill acquisition over content knowledge. Having said that, I see no reason to overlook what I see as glaring flaws, such as disregarding student effort. It's no secret that in the real world there are times when effort counts, so one has to wonder whether a student will be adequately prepared for success in college and beyond if effort is dismissed throughout the K-12 years. Similarly, if standards-based learning leaves students with the notion that the timing of work submission is not subject to scrutiny, it will come as a rude awakening in the working world when they lose a contract to a competitor who understands the value of punctuality.

Teaching in both the IB and AP systems has sharpened this kind of thinking for me. I taught IB Economics at the American International School of Riyadh, and I have taught AP Psychology and AP Research, and now AP Microeconomics, AP Macroeconomics, and AP Business at the American School in Taichung. The two programs were built around different ideas of what learning looks like. IB asks students to evaluate, weigh perspectives, and defend a judgment, and it rewards depth. AP asks students to apply models precisely and consistently, and its clear rubrics let me assess more often, return feedback within days, and give students more chances to reassess. Neither system has the complete answer. My job is to take the strengths of each and bring them to whatever classroom I am in.

The bottom line is that best practices come and go for valid and important reasons, but it is the responsibility of an educator to assess new developments carefully and adapt their practice to best serve their students. In that sense, my educational philosophy is a work in progress, shaped by concepts and principles both new and old, and by my own desire to make sure the particular students I serve receive instruction that meets their needs.

The Core Tenets I Consider Timeless

Though there are ever-changing variables in my practice, from the school and its institutional ways, to the students and their infinite variety of personalities and learning styles, to the school curriculum and course curricula, I find that four tenets underpin everything I do.

Student-Teacher Trust

I believe the bond of trust between a teacher and a student is of paramount importance. My background in sport has led to a life in sport, and I still coach today. That life also makes me a voracious reader of biographies, autobiographies, and profiles of coaches. I am continually inspired by how coaches and players build mutual trust to achieve maximum performance. And I do not feel immodest in saying that I have seen the same in my classes, where students I have been able to connect with work harder to learn. I have always been a strong proponent of teachers being involved in extracurricular activities for exactly this reason, as they provide one more invaluable venue for connecting with students. Though our respective roles may differ (student and teacher, coach and athlete, MUN advisor and delegate, debate coach and debater), the trust we share is the fuel that propels us to reach higher for something

better.

Inject Humor in Proper Doses

Teaching is serious work, and the classroom and the learning process deserve respect from teacher and student alike. Paradoxically, a serious place of learning also frequently provides situations ripe for suitable doses of humor and even silliness. I feel not only comfortable but compelled to let students know that laughter and fun have a place in my classes. It pains me, especially at the high school level, to see so many students count down the minutes at the end of the school day so they can heave a sigh of relief and go hang out with friends for some much-needed laughter. Learning need not be painful or boring, so I try my best to balance a serious approach to learning with the attitude that students can have fun in the classroom.

Inclusivity

Creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome is essential for a successful classroom and school. I feel personally connected to this idea, because as a bicultural and bilingual child I often felt like I did not fit in anywhere, except at school. Maybe that is why I loved school so much. I grew up between Japanese and American cultures, graduated from an international school in Tokyo, and have since taught in Japan, Honduras, Bahrain, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and now Taiwan. I am, in other words, a third culture kid who became a third culture adult. Many of my students are living a version of that same experience. They move between languages at home and at school, and many of them pause before answering the question "where are you from?" Some feel that they belong to several places and to none of them completely. I know that feeling firsthand, and I know how much it matters when a classroom treats a mixed identity as a strength rather than something to explain. I am very fortunate to have worked at international schools, and I am mindful about creating an inviting classroom for all students, regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language background, or any other attribute that might otherwise make them feel left out.

Critical Thinking

Data and facts are the food of learning, but digestion needs to consist of more than rote memorization. I believe the ability to comprehend, process, and critically analyze data and facts should be the ultimate goal in any discipline. This applies to every course I have taught over the past fifteen years, from debate, sociology, and World History to IB Economics, AP Economics, AP Psychology, AP Research, and Model United Nations. Though each subject comes with different content, my goal in covering that content never changes. I try to get students to embrace critical thinking as a habit of mind that will serve them well in future endeavors.