

Philosophy of Teaching and Leading

*“Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day.
Teach a person to fish and you feed them for a lifetime.”*

Developing a personal philosophy of teaching and leading refers to how one perceives themselves professionally; and furthermore, how they communicate that perception. By observing, reflecting, and learning from those in your life, one can formulate a position, or philosophy by which pieces from those you relate to, or identify with, become part your character. Being someone whom others aspire to be, or learn from, is how I view my role in education. In essence, I want to be an active, reflective, and model practitioner for my students, colleagues, and those in my respected field. Terms such as inspire, empower, foster, and enhance are used in many philosophies; and these words accurately guide my intentions as an educator and leader.

Numerous teaching models and theories exist to give relevance to teaching and leading, but I embrace two: 1) the ‘guided discovery’ method - which utilizes life experiences to assist in the development of those one teaches and leads, and 2) ‘experiential learning’ - which facilitates learning through optimum and heightened levels of safe, effective, and positive experiences. The combination of these two highly regarded teaching and learning methodologies allow for the above quote to represent my personal conviction in the education and leadership paradigm. But, is being an educator and a recreation leader the same? Can an educator be a relevant and successful recreation leader? In my mind the foundation of education is the primary and fundamental role involved in recreation leadership. Recreation skillsets are learned through comprehensive and positive environments where participants can practice and acquire assistance from trained and experienced facilitators. Blending education with recreation leadership is a perfect relationship when there is a facilitator willing to ‘teach’ the skills needed to be successful. Many recreation leaders and campus recreation directors agree that education is the key to developing a successful campus recreation programs. Great leaders are great educators, and great educators and great leaders.

Interestingly, however, society has a definitive system when it comes to the leadership roles: lead or follow. Fortunately, educational systems have adopted and developed leadership curriculum models which allow students to learn about, and understand complex leadership theories to better the cultural and contextual dimensions of leadership frameworks. However, understanding differences in how people learn is essential to the success of an educational

system. As I think of those who made an impact in my educational life, I have positive and negative memories; but I have been able to learn from both. In many ways, my teaching methods and leadership styles have been shaped by the ideals which I disliked, more so than those I liked. These circumstances have impacted and challenged me to be an empathetic and empowering educator; developing a broad understanding how people learn. Former Mississippi State University President, Donald Zacharias, pointed out in a commencement address that, “by the time you finish four years of college, you will have had approximately 100 teachers in your lifetime.” The truth is, all of us remember only one or two, and I want to be that one - the one educator in someone’s life remembered for making a positive difference; an impact which altered their life in a purposeful, meaningful direction, especially through education and recreation.

When teaching, I strive to impact the episodic memory, which is defined as a “one-shot” learning mechanism. Needing only one exposure in order to remember content, the conceptual learning sequences involved in recreation, leisure, and adventure is an ideal circumstance for this style of learning. Add an instructionally and developmentally appropriate curriculum or system of policies, and outdoor recreation becomes the epitome for an episodic-enriching education. Furthermore, there are roles in this learning sequence for participants, and they are simple to understand, yet complicated to define. Terms expressing learner roles are: willing, responsible, open-minded, able, reflective, participatory, and patient. Most of these characteristics are learned traits which students acquire from helpful role models, positive environments, and ample opportunities for successful trials. Teaching with a guided discovery model and using a positive experiential learning platform affects the episodic memory; inevitably developing a strong foundation and environment for lifelong learning and lifelong recreation habits.

It is a privilege and responsibility to be involved in a learner’s education, and I want to facilitate opportunities which generate successful, productive contributors to a sustainable society - especially in recreation. With experience teaching and directing programs, I have a firm belief that the environment should be developed around the overall collection of those involved. Our society needs programs that influence active-based recreation opportunities and education that provides the basics for a number of outdoor recreation activities. In many cases, however, an environment is dictated by an incompetent and non- professional person in charge; whom creates a restricting and dejected experience. These atmospheres are ineffective for successful teaching and learning. An anonymous quote for this area of discussion states,

“teachers don’t impact for a year, but for a lifetime.” The environment developed by educational professionals through personal attitudes and beliefs set tones for the quality and quantity of lifelong learning. In a conducive, motivating environment, learners not only learn more efficiently, they retain more content. Striving to empower participants in outdoor programming to take individual responsibility for their learning, and challenging them to develop a passion for their skills and life, is a personal and professional quest.

By and large, successful teaching and learning is not solely about numerical results, but encouraging the participation in the process of education and learning. A sign hung in Albert Einstein’s office stated, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” Allowing and providing opportunities for participants to ‘try’ new things which enhance their life and to encourage people to be active in their life as an active practitioner is my role in education and recreation leadership. From an elementary physical education teacher, to a university outdoor adventure director, to a parks and recreation supervisor, I want to provide an educational opportunity where all people feel safe, respected, and challenged, regardless of their gender or ethnicity. My ethics, practices, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences are all part of my usefulness as an educational tool, cultivating interest and promoting successful programs. Metaphorically, I like to perceive myself as a Swiss army knife; although it has all the necessary tools, not all of them can be used at one time, and some are never used, but each tool on the knife is used for a specific purpose, at a specific time and when that time is needed those tools are there ready to be utilized. We learn more from those we identify with, taking knowledge from those admired and respected, through experiences, challenges, transitions, and opportunities. Like this metaphor, I aspire to be that educational device used in the learning process, continuing to contribute value and substance to my field, utilized by those willing to take what they want, how they can, when they need it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Todd M. Davis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "T" and "M".

Todd M. Davis, CPRP