

Brantlee Richter Spotlight Transcribed:

Alex

“I’m here today with Dr. Brantlee Spakes Richter. Member of the academy of distinguished teaching scholars and teacher of the year for 2015-2016 academic year. And we’re going to ask a few questions.

First I would really like to know, this might be a funny questions, but have you always been an excellent teacher or was there a learning curve to this?”

Brantlee

“I would not call myself an excellent teacher. That's like one of those Murphy's law things. As soon as you start thinking of yourself as having achieved some measure of goodness much less excellent. You're about to get sucked in by the undertow. So, no. I wouldn't even say that I am anywhere close to that benchmark yet, and I am not sure I ever will be. But, I will say that I came to teaching with a few benefits already behind me. I wouldn't say that I have... if you ask my mother and she would probably say that I was always a good communicator, always had good verbal skills, oral skills, getting the point across, making an argument, and I've never been frightened of getting up in front of people. So I think that those are two things that I came into teaching with that have served me very well. It has been a very strong advantage that helped. They get you part way there. Certainly in classroom situations especially. A traditional lecture type situation where you're in front of the class and you have to communicate something and you have to be able to think on your feet. I think those are skills/talents that are very helpful to start with.

However, let's say that they only get you a little bit of the way there towards being actually a good teacher much less an excellent teacher. What ever you show up to the game with you really have to give enough to leverage it to effectively get points across to the students. To let students take control of their learning and to achievement. So yes, it's helpful to have some basic lax of fears. Some basic kinds of skills in your toolbox. I just don't think that, I don't think anyone starts off as a great teacher, and I don't think that most of us ever really get to the point that we're comfortable with that kind of a label.

Awards are a little intimidating actually. Because then there's like this label up on your forehead that says this person is excellent, expect something of them! I'm not sure any of us are prepared to live up to that.”

Alex

“I think that speaks volumes actually. Part of an excellent teacher is the fact that they don’t consider themselves that way. They’re always striving to make the student experience.

Brantlee

“ I think that’s a fair assessment. That anyone who thinks they have achieved excellence stops working. And as soon as you stop working you’ve lost it. You no longer communicate, you’re no longer thinking. You’re no longer working towards making things better. And if you’re not working towards making things better you’re just gonna get stale. And the students will eat you alive. Deservedly so. “

Alex

“So do you consider... And before our conversations started you were talking about how every year you do something for your courses.. Is that just part of trying to create the very best experience for your students to focus on.”

Brantlee

It is. A lot of that comes from feedback throughout the semester, and certainly the feedback the end of the semester that is more official. But every time you go through a course you figure out something that might work a little better. You get his idea about something that’s really gonna work and you go through it and you’re like... Maybe? Well what if I did this? And that’s part of keeping the experience fresh and part of keeping your own interest in it and your own heart in it. But it’s also a continual improvement process and student groups change.

Certainly on a decade level, students change, expectations change, their experiences change. And you need to be responsive to these changes. And then from one class to the next different groups have different personalities and they have different group needs as they come through. The first few weeks of the course you start to feel out what’s going to work best and what’s not going to work best for this group or the one after it. A lot of those adjustments happen as you go to.

(5:20) Trying to create a new tool here or a new video there or some kind of new resource to fill in your where maybe this group didn't have something that group did. “

Q: What is your teaching Philosophy?

Brantlee

(5:35) “My Teaching Philosophy has really been evolved and solidified into an analogy. And that analogy is Teacher as trail guide.

(5:47) I really think that this works well for me, especially as I think about my approach to classes and to students. That an instructor is a trail guide and your trail guide because you know the trail. You’ve been down that trail. 10 times, 100 times. You’ve been down that trail, you have some experiences with it you have some knowledge about it, and your job as the trail guide is to get this group of explorers through the expedition. Get them from point A to point B over there. Hopefully safely, hopefully with no major injuries

(6:30) Your job also is to create the best possible experience for the people on the expedition. Then, just like in the classroom, every group going on the expedition is going to be different. So it doesn’t matter if you’ve been down this trail 100 times before, every experience is unique because every group you’re taking down is unique. Even within the group you’re going to have a wide range of needs and expectations.

(7:00) So if you’re taking the group down an actual physical trail, you’re going to have some students who are more physically fit than others. There are going to be some who just have difficulty navigating the trail who might need extra help and extra support. You’re going to have some who have no interest whatsoever in the journey, they just want to get to point B. That’s all they want they want to be able to say they made it to point B, I planted my flag, I can check that off my bucket list and go home now.

(7:28) You’re going to have some that are totally into the experience, they want to see everything along the trail, they want to soak up the wanderlust of the experience. Then you’re going to have some who have very particular narrow experiences that they’re looking for. You got the birders. They want to stop at every possible spot along that trail, but all they want to look at is birds. They don’t care about the lizards, they don’t care about the snakes, they don’t care about the plants, they just want to count off the birds on their bird list and fill out their log and go home.

(8:00) So it’s the same in a classroom, and you’ve got this incredible diverse group of people that you’re trying to shepherd through this body of information, and knowledge, and understanding and every one of them has unique needs and everyone has unique expectations, they have unique goals for the class. And as a teacher you are responsible for trying to provide the best possible experience to all of them. That’s where I think that just having communication skills doesn’t cut it. You might be able to just point out the things along the trail for those who want to see them. But unless you can be truly receptive to all of those different needs and try to come up with ways along the way to make the experience as good as possible, then you’re not really achieving your goals.

Q: How is it that you portray your concern for all your students.

(8:56) Considering my role as a trail guide has been helpful in making me more receptive to those different needs and expectations and that probably comes across to the students that I really to make a concerted effort to all the audiences in that one room. And there are a lot sometimes.

(9:22) So for example I have a class that is an upward division majors class. And most of the people in it are in our departments realm, the plant sciences kind of realm, Biology, botany, plant science majors. But it's a pathology class so I also get and invite a lot of students who might be pre-med or pre-pharmacy, or health sciences who are there because it's the only undergraduate class available on campus where they can actually study pathology and have a lab, and they can isolate pathogens from tissue, in a lab. We can't do that with undergrads with human pathogens, but we can have plant pathogens. So I always get these kinds of smaller groups of students in my class who have very unique and specific needs as we go through and so from the onset I pull the class and I find out what everyone is interested in and I really make an effort all the way through the semester to pull in those special interests. And I think that's something, thinking about it as a trail guide has really helped a lot.

Q: Tell us about an experience that you found magical as an educator.

(10:34) Different classes have different goals for the students. I have different goals for the students out of my different classes. So for example I have an undergrad general education class on Fungi. And what the students come out with from that class is that this is kind of an appreciation class. There was like this big thing in the 70's and 80's about appreciation classes. I am a big fan of the appreciation classes, I think there's value in that! There's value in things beyond knowledge. And they come out with a completely different perspective on the world around them. And they get back to me after the semester and they're like: "I'm seeing these things everywhere, I can't stop seeing these things! I'm just walking down the street and I am seeing these things that i've never seen before!" And that's magical to me, and that's one of the goals of that class. I don't expect that someone is going to come out of that lower level division general ed class with expertise in the topic. But, for them to actually start noticing things, and taking an interest in things that they never would have noticed or taken an interest in other wise is just spectacular. That's what I want for those classes. What I want for my upper division majors is something entirely different.

Q: If you could give us one golden nugget, what would it be?

(12:00) My favorite golden nugget is actually stolen. I go to these teaching things, these seminars and workshops and they're great ways to get new ideas, and things to incorporate in my teaching. I wish I could remember who said it because then I could credit them. But

someone said something to the effect of to “Focus on that one small thing” each time you teach a class. That made so much sense to me. It’s so easy to get overwhelmed with.. “Oh I have to do everything perfect in this class” when you develop a new class. Or “I have to do everything better this time” Or you have all these other ideas on how you could have done that better, or “There’s no way I’m going to get all that done by next semester.”

(13:00) So I think the golden nugget that I would share is to try not to worry so much about perfection and getting everything you want to do done all at once. But keep picking away at it, keep trying to make those small improvements as you go along. And worry about being responsive to the student needs than about having the perfect course.