



Endurance - engaging with students, a lifetime of discovery

Renier Coetzee

University of the Western Cape, School of Pharmacy

Renier is the winner of the Johnson & Johnson Teacher of the Year award which was awarded to him at the APSSA conference in 2017



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My mother always said I should become a teacher. I wanted to be a preacher, work in the circus and paint abstract landscapes. Being a teacher at a university today, I guess you need the skills of a preacher, clown and artist.

My desire is to become the best teacher I can be. I believe that just as educators recognise students who want to be the best, students recognise educators who want to be the best. My objectives

as an educator are to encourage my students to become curious about the world around them, develop skills to encourage self-directed learning, and take responsibility for the health needs of those they will serve in future. Through strong leadership and mentorship, I encourage students to become life-long learners and responsible citizens. I am available, accessible, approachable and most importantly excited to teach students as I assist them through this journey. My role as an educator is to teach didactic knowledge with an emphasis on clinical application. I have to serve as a role model in the classroom, but also in my practice environment, which includes many of the public sector hospitals in and around Cape Town.

The famous British philosopher, Bertrand Russel, once wrote, "To understand the actual world as it is, not as we should wish it to be, is the beginning of wisdom." To me "understanding the world as it is", means to be realistic! Teachers of today need to be realistic in their approach to teaching students of this day and age. Often what we think is best, just because we have always done it in a particular way, might not be the most effective. We as teachers need to realise that we have to engage students in the learning process. We all want to improve learning and ensure knowledge is retained.

Researchers have identified four key elements that help develop student engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000):

- *Autonomy*: the amount of power students have to determine what they are doing and how they are doing it.
- *Competence*: when a student has the necessary skills to complete an assignment or task successfully.
- *Relatedness*: is when students build relationships with peers and teachers whom they like and respect.
- *Relevance*: When student view their work as interesting and useful for improving their present lives or achieving their hopes and dreams.

As teachers, we need to at least try to have all four of these elements in our lessons. Students will feel that they have the power to determine their future. This increases the likelihood that they will be able to transfer what they learn to other contexts. The work they do in class will become relevant to their daily practice.

In my everyday teaching to successfully apply didactic knowledge to the practice setting, I need to create an environment for students to exercise critical thinking and develop problem solving skills. Students are given opportunities to think, talk, reflect, and collaborate with classmates, rather than passively listen to me. In case lab sessions, I use patient cases, profiles, and scenarios to allow students to actively apply course work to pharmacy practice.



Class photo

Over the past four years, I have developed therapeutic case lab sessions that provide students with structured opportunities to develop and practise problem solving and disease management skills.

It is essential that my knowledge of human diseases and my passion for patient care be conveyed during lectures to stimulate student learning. I incorporate patient stories from my acute care practice into lectures to stress important points, engage students, and stimulate critical thinking. However, it is also important that I acknowledge when I do not know an answer to a question, demonstrating how to think through a problem and utilise appropriate resources to answer the question so that students can learn logical thought processes required for clinical practice.

I believe our students are young colleagues in training and should be treated with respect and concern related to his/her development as a pharmacist. Whether in lectures, case lab sessions, or on clinical rotations, I provide students with encouragement and support to apply their newly gained knowledge and skills. It is my desire to instill a passion for life-long learning and patient care in each student to ensure patients receive the best care possible.

Because my main teaching objective is to facilitate development of critical thinking skills in students, I prefer to examine learning by testing the application of knowledge. In didactic course work, this often takes the form of written multiple choice and short answer questions using case studies. However, learning may also be tested via verbal questioning either in a classroom or via a practice setting. My preference in examining learning is to observe how a student functions when placed in an actual or

simulated practice setting, such as how a student provides patient care during a clinical rotation at a practice site or when asked to give an account of where they were able to apply knowledge and skills gained on campus.

In my favorite astronaut, Scott Kelly's book, *"Endurance. A year in space, a lifetime of discovery"*, I read the following about a teacher who believed in his abilities as a student (Kelly, 2017):

"...the principal of our high school, Jeffry Tarnoff, was begging me not to quit my trigonometry course, attempting to impress upon me that I had potential if I could just focus. I tried to explain to him how impossible it was for me to pay attention in that class, in any class. His words had no effect on me. I quit trigonometry. After that, whenever I saw him in the hallways, I would avoid his gaze. I was surprised by how much it bugged me to know I had let him down. Still, he never seemed to give up on me. Years later, he came to both of my space shuttle launches, and I think it meant a lot to him to see that his faith had paid off for at least one student."

I would like to be a "Jeffry Tarnoff" to all pharmacy students that will walk into my classroom. Always trying to help them become the best pharmacist they can be, believing that each one has the potential to be great and achieve something in life worth living for.

References

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