

Section 2: Philosophy of Teaching

Describe your beliefs about teaching and how your philosophy of teaching affects students and colleagues. How are your teaching beliefs demonstrated in your personal teaching style? What are your greatest contributions to or accomplishments in education?

When I first started teaching, I wanted to become a great teacher. However, classes went much better when I stopped focusing on becoming the best teacher I could be and started focusing on helping my students become the best students that they could be.

One of my strongest beliefs about effective teaching is that, paradoxically, it takes a shift in emphasis away from the teacher and onto the student. If there is one thing that educational research has established, it's that passive learning—the archetypal talking head with students scribbling notes—is clear and away the least effective method to learn almost anything, especially if our aim is for students to reach beyond the mere understanding of a concept and get to a level where they acquire the more valuable adeptness at the subject matter. Outstanding teaching therefore demands that we consistently engage students at all points in the learning process. Whether we are introducing a concept, building strength at fundamentals, or asking students to apply knowledge in a realistic task, it is critical that we draw them into the action, make them a part of the process, and give them opportunities to apply the subject matter at hand.

I have been fortunate in my work at Intermediate District 287 to have had numerous teaching roles: teaching Japanese to high school students via television, the internet, and in person; designing online courses; and helping other teachers incorporate technology into their instruction, to name a few. No matter what I am teaching or the medium I use to teach it, I strive to add active elements to every aspect of my classes. These can range from a simple pairing of students and asking them to summarize what we've just discussed, to elaborate two-week-long units in which I ask small groups of Japanese students to play the role—all in Japanese—of a castaway trying to survive on a deserted tropical island. I also use technology in many forms to increase the depth of student involvement in a project. In addition, I'm a firm believer that effective, well-constructed games can radically increase the level of student engagement and

achievement. One of my students' favorite activities is a type of "Battle Bots" game in which teams of students draw elaborate robots on the white board, then try to defeat the other robots in a frantic Japanese question-and-answer game.

This style of teaching affects students and colleagues in a number of positive ways that reach beyond solely enhanced achievement. When a classroom is active, it fosters a sense of community and imparts a vibrancy and pulse to the class that makes the learning process both challenging and fun. Students respond to this type of teaching, as is evident in our Japanese enrollment numbers. When I first started teaching Japanese, there were approximately 25 students enrolled in the program at Armstrong High School; this year more than 90 students enrolled. The benefits of active learning also ripple well beyond the classroom: students feel a part of the school; they like coming to school; and they enjoy learning. As an added bonus, I've found that active learning obviates many classroom discipline issues: engaged students behave well. Also, active learning sparks creativity that further increases the level of active learning in the classroom. One of my favorite things to do is to ask my upper level students to come up with alternate or improved ways for us to practice a given concept or subject matter; some of the ideas they generate lead to excellent original activities or significant improvements to existing activities. Discussions and lesson-plan exchanges with other teachers also help to both increase and enhance the use of active learning in my and my colleague's classrooms.

A large number of the students who have used these methods to learn to speak Japanese have subsequently—in grass-roots fashion—increased the bonds of friendship between the United States and Japan. Others have gone on to teaching professions and report back that they use the methods in their classes as well. Also, I have worked in teacher training and curriculum development for a portion of my educational career, and this has allowed me to spread a love for engaging, active learning to a wider audience than only the students I teach directly. When I look back on my 15 years in teaching to date, it is the fruits of this advocacy of active learning that has been my greatest satisfaction and has to be considered my largest contribution to education.