

# Philosophy of Teaching

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While I do work with (academic) light bulbs, I never did amount to much of an electrician—despite the rest of my brothers following in my father’s construction footsteps. I am from the countryside of Pennsylvania, raised by a country father and a city mother, and am the recipient of a public school education in the outskirts of Amish country. However, I have had many wonderfully global experiences that have enhanced this upbringing, including working with refugees for four months in the Balkans, studying critical languages intensively, and conducting research in the swamps of Zambia and mountains of Tanzania. My wife and I do not share a common nationality, ethnicity, religion, or first language: We are diverse, our life is diverse, and I enjoy such diversity that can only be found in the college classroom. As a scholar who began by focusing on Africa, my teaching philosophy can be best described using the wisdom found in just five of the proverbs of East Africa.

First, knowledge is like the ocean: It has neither walls nor doors [*Elimu ni kama bahari. Haina kuta wala dari*]. I believe that when we open our classrooms to students that we are, in fact, opening the world to them. Regardless of the course that I am teaching, I always share with my students a passion for learning about everything surrounding us. Thus, while my students may enter the classroom to begin their studies, they leave with a desire to explore, create, and discover.

Second, wisdom is predicated neither upon age nor ethnicity [*Hekima haitegemei umri wala rangi*]. Post-secondary institutions are frequently criticized for perpetuating barriers to education. However, not only is my classroom open to all who want to learn, but in that classroom we embrace and build upon our differences because we can all learn from one another’s experiences. Wisdom arrives in many forms, and often we do not hear enough from the marginalized, oppressed, or forgotten voices in society—these voices are heard and listened to in my classroom.

Third, a guest/stranger is like the rain [*Mgeni ni maji ya mvua*]. My students arrive in the classroom and, although their presence is enriching, they remain there for only a short period of time; thus, it is my responsibility as an educator to ensure that my lessons lead to authentic personal and academic growth. Oftentimes this arrives through differentiation of activities, in order to ensure that every student has an opportunity to learn in the manner most effective for him or her; on the other hand, this also sometimes arrives through the presence of young children in the back of the room with a coloring book. Why? If my students have limited time with me, I would rather have them bring visitors to class than stay home without childcare at the expense of their learning.

Fourth, there is nothing sweeter than that which requires heavy lifting [*Hakuna kilicho kitamu kuliko kilichopatikana kwa shida*]. My courses are rigorous but are not an impossible mountain to climb. When developing the syllabus for a course, I utilize backwards design and first construct a list of attainable objectives before pairing these to formative and summative assessments. Students should not simply be evaluated on fine details, but rather on the larger concepts and their applications. In fact, this makes the material more difficult than rote memorization but results in deeper understanding. My students pride themselves on earning (not simply receiving) high marks in a difficult, though manageable course.

Finally, unity is strength [*Umoja ni nguvu*]. Much like the environments where I have conducted fieldwork, my classroom becomes our village, our community. We work collaboratively to construct our understanding of the world through the reading, the lessons, the discussions, and the assignments. In pursuit of this task, the very first day of class is spent building rapport with and getting to know all the members of this village. My students know that I always have their best interests at heart and will give them a powerful “nudge” when necessary.