

Alicia K. Long

alicia.k.long@gmail.com / aliciaklong.com

Teaching Philosophy

*“Whoever teaches learns in the art of teaching,
and whoever learns teaches in the art of learning” ~ Paulo Freire*

Recently, I received an email from a student who had just registered to take an upcoming course I was going to teach, in which they shared some concerns and asked me some questions about what to expect from the course. I replied and we exchanged a few more messages. Afterward, I realized that this conversation summarized perfectly what I considered my teaching principles. The student was concerned about the content (the course was about diverse children’s literature and this is a controversial topic in current society, especially in the state of Florida) and how it could contradict their personal beliefs. Thanks to that exchange I had to articulate what I teach, why, and how, and the student had to critically decide if that satisfied their expectations. In this statement, I will try to achieve the same goal of summarizing my theoretical background, my assumptions and expectations as an educator, and the practical aspects of how I aim to guide my students to achieve the learning outcomes and competences expected in a Library and Information Science program.

Education is an integral part of my identity, both as a teacher (my first career) and as a librarian. I have been involved in formal and informal education all my life. I enjoy teaching as much as I enjoy learning, as Freire (1998) reminded us in the quote above. I am formed by socio-constructivist learning theories and a social justice framework. I believe in evidence-based instruction, and I have always been interested in critical pedagogy and -as an educator of adults- andragogy principles (hooks, 1994; Knowles et al., 2020) which I incorporate by using a model of student-centered curriculum design (Cullen et al., 2012). All of this background means that I believe that learning is socially constructed, that it is affected by power dynamics and socio-political-economic contexts, and that students bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences that can be used to achieve their desired goals. In practice, this implies that I use a lot of self-reflection prompts, interactive discussions (yes, even in asynchronous modalities), and real-world contexts for the assignments. For example, in my Multicultural Literature for Children course, for the first assignment the students use a self-reflection “wheel” of identity factors as a preparation for recording a video essay in which they reflect about the books they read as children, and whether those books were mirrors (they could see themselves reflected,) windows (they could see others,) or sliding glass doors (they could step into other people’s experiences,) as brilliantly described by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990).

I strive to develop relationships with my students, even (and especially) in online courses by making myself available with virtual office hours, but also by posting regular video announcements with updates and comments on how the course is progressing. At the same time, I expect interaction from them. Because I develop my curricula with the principles of backward design (Wilkins & McTighe, 1998) I set up learning goals and outcomes first. Reflection and critical thinking are always top learning outcomes, no matter what the course content is. In view of those outcomes, I think of the best evidence of learning in the areas related to the course, and I create authentic assessment practices from real workplace applications. The final step is to select the content to best achieve those goals. As an example, in a course I designed about library services for diverse communities, the students have to produce a community needs-assessment report of a selected library's community, as if they were a Library Consultant. Not only do they learn how to conduct a needs assessment, but they have to demonstrate that they're learning it by doing it in a real community. In addition, my authentic assessment projects always include rubrics relating the assignment to the learning outcomes, so the students understand the alignment of the coursework to their educational goals. Students have told me in their evaluations that this motivates them to strive for better work, since they see how they will apply those skills in their future jobs. Thanks to a former student's suggestion, I was invited as a speaker at a College Board Conference, and I wrote a book chapter about the impact of designing the course this way.

I have extensive experience learning and teaching in the online environment, and I research best practices for teaching online synchronously and asynchronously (Harasim, 2012; Picciano, 2017). Some examples are: I create weekly videos with current updates; I use materials in different formats (video, essay, podcast, report, etc.); and I prepare interactive lectures that require participation, even in asynchronous classes. I employ a variety of innovative educational technologies to promote engagement and offer options in the formats and media to submit some assignments, to favor different learning styles and inclusive practices.

My role in the course is being a learning facilitator. I strive to teach with a culturally responsive and authentic methodology by addressing the students' differing needs, by applying best practices in inclusive design and accessibility, and by trying to position myself culturally and as the instructor who sets up opportunities to learn with and from the students. I believe that diversity enriches everyone, equity gives all of us what we need to learn, and inclusion ensures that all our voices are heard.

Since learning theory, online education, and pedagogy are also my research interests, I look forward to continuing my own growth as an educator, by conducting more research, pursuing professional development, and actively participating in the community of LIS educators, as I'll explain in the next section.