

# DISPOSITIONS

Foundations of American Education  
FDN 3800

The study of undergraduate foundations of American Education, FDN 3800, is organized around three central themes: 1. Curriculum, 2. Knowledge, Emotion, and Identity, and 3. Power and Justice.(1)

The questions explored in this course aim to develop in candidates the dispositions outlined in this document.

Other unit dispositions already in place, such as: "View diversity as an asset to educational settings," (ASU Middle Grades Diversity Standard) are based on the two foundational dispositions outlined here.

Classroom activities:

1. Debates in which each student has to learn to argue systematically in favor of both sides of a controversial issue.
2. Classroom discussions in which opposing viewpoints are safe to articulate. (Here, the professor models democratic dialogue, making it evident to students that this is what they are engaging in.)
3. Exercises that emphasize the uniqueness and variety of each human being's experiences. Reading fiction is particularly useful in this regard.

Dispositions can be evaluated based on student performance on exams or papers in FDN 3800 and using candidate responses to case studies.

(1) Please see the document entitled "Rationale" for a more detailed explanation regarding the ways in which Foundations of American Education, FDN 3800, addresses the learning needs of pre-service teachers, and aligns with NCATE and DPI standards.



## NCATE Standard One:

"Candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other professional school personnel know and demonstrate the content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Assessments indicate that candidates meet professional, state, and institutional standards."

**1. The candidate must understand and demonstrate that knowledge is bound by context.** *Motto: To understand me, walk a mile in my shoes.*

**2. The candidate must understand and demonstrate that teaching is a moral endeavor.** *Motto: Actions speak louder than words.*

The education gadfly and retired New York State Teacher of the Year, John Taylor Gatto, has written, "You teach who you are," a phrase that on the surface at least is quite perplexing. It is perplexing in part because there is a broad consensus in the

literature that highlights the importance of subject matter expertise to good teaching.

Teachers who are deeply conversant in their field of study are likely to be among the teachers who enable their students to be most successful in their own studies. Yet it would seem that "you teach who you are" indicates something critical to teaching that extends far beyond being a good chemistry teacher if you have a good grasp of chemistry yourself.

The idea that we teach who we are, that our dispositions are important to our ability to teach is hardly a new one.

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Plato asks us to struggle with the implications of this every time we read the *Allegory of the Cave*, and wonder why the dwellers of the cave are so content. At the same time, the sad and frustrated young teachers who leave the profession in droves within the first few years of teaching give silent testimony to a failure to develop appropriate dispositions.

What habits of mind and behavior are essential to good teaching? We believe there are two from which all others flow. One is the ability to recognize the complexity of the construction of knowledge, to recognize that truth itself takes many forms. The second is based on the first, and concerns the foundation upon which decisions are made. The act of teaching requires us day after day to face others over whom we have power, and to make decisions about how we will address their needs as learners. This makes teaching an inherently moral enterprise, and requires that schools of education be involved in what Parker Palmer has called “teacher formation”.

The fact that many teachers do not feel powerful points to the importance of the development in teachers of dispositions that would result at least in more sociologically accurate appraisals of situations in which they might find themselves. Thus, there is an epistemological issue at the core of questions concerning the moral development of teachers. It centers on how a person views knowledge. Do they conceive of it as absolute? Is knowledge found in context? Is it socially constructed?

## The Many Forms of Truth

When a white female public school teacher sees an eleven-year-old white female goofing off in her classroom, what does she think she knows about this student? What does she think she knows about the student if he is a black male? Is

what she knows regarding both students the same, or different?

What the teacher thinks she knows will help determine how she acts, so it matters very much how accurate her perceptions are. But how do we judge the meaning of another person’s behavior? Our judgments are always to some degree suspect because each of us develops an ability to perceive others within a limited cultural and familial context. As a result, many of our perceptions are going to yield knowledge that is so circumscribed it has to simply be described as wrong.

We need to teach that the knowledge we have cannot be absolute; but that while it is not absolute, it does not therefore become worthless. Students must practice the epistemological uncertainty that makes critical analysis and a critical consciousness possible.

Unfortunately for many students, much of their pre-college training has drilled them in an opposing epistemological framework. Their training in the sciences, for example, has often treated science as a collection of facts to be memorized, rather than as a way of exploring a complex and changing world. Genuine scientific knowledge is always contested in a community of experts. For other students, their religious upbringing contributes to a debilitating epistemological certainty. In consequence, they must experience that their deeply held religious beliefs can co-exist with a developmentally advanced understanding of the nature of knowledge. Being able to embrace both one’s religious tradition and epistemological uncertainty is, in itself, one manifestation of this key disposition.

*So this, then, is the first step toward developing the dispositions needed to be a good teacher: Understand that knowledge is not absolute and then practice how to act differently as a result.*

## Teaching as a Moral Act

The second step involves learning that who you are as a teacher is a public act that happens in relationship with others. This means, for example, that I cannot simply say that I am not a racist, or that I don’t care how much money someone has. I must recognize that who I am happens in a world where racism and classism are rampant. When I benefit from racist and classist structures, these structures are embedded in the fabric of my identity. The only way to alter this reality is through my behavior: I have to act against racism and classism.

Teachers are faced with such decisions everyday. Do you take a job teaching AP and honors courses only, or do you use your teaching skills to also teach courses for the lowest tracks in your school? Alternatively, you may teach in a school that has a population that is sixty percent children of color and forty percent white, with a high percentage of children receiving free and reduced lunches. As your skills as a teacher grow, you are offered a job at a school with children from families with a considerably higher socioeconomic status. Do you take the job? Why or why not?

Our students must demonstrate that they understand that their answers to real life questions such as these will not only impact the lives of children in school, but will also make them who they are, a person who fights to close the achievement gap, or a person who chooses simply to amass unearned class and race privileges.

*This is the second step toward developing the dispositions needed to be a good teacher: Understand that a teacher’s decisions are always moral decisions; practice making conscious choices to promote integrity, justice and compassion.*