Teaching philosophy: More than two decades of experience

In the course of more than 23 years of teaching dermatology, my teaching philosophy has been influenced by world class mentors whom I have had the opportunity of working with and for before I joined my home – The Department of Dermatology at the American University of Beirut.

I had the pleasure of working with Dr. Amal Kurban among many other distinct teachers during my residency training from 1981 to 1984 who taught me to be a “complete” dermatologist. His words paved the way for me to develop my clinical skills and to build up sound clinicopathologic correlations. His actions spoke volumes of amazing bedside manners, outstanding administrative skills, and impeccable academic stature. Between 1984 and 1986, I was privileged to train with a world class dermatopathologist who complemented my learning experiences at the microscopic level and taught me the histologic reaction patterns of the skin and the fine tuning with a sharp eye to arrive at a diagnosis. Dr. Mihm had a sharp eye and an unbeatable talent in reading the riddles of dermatology and was a superb teacher of correlations but this time in reverse of what I have acquired during my residency training at AUB.

This two way learning skill – correlating clinical findings with the putative microscopic features and correlating conspicuous and subtle microscopic attributes with presumed clinical manifestations – is what in essence I have transmitted to generations of dermatologists who had training with me since I joined the Department of Dermatology at AUB in January 1987.

First, let me begin with the infamous “dermatopathology seminar” which deserves so much credit in my teaching philosophy. The old-fashioned kodachrome presentations supplemented by a “CHALK TALK” taught residents to quickly think on their feet, to narrow their differential diagnoses, and to properly select management strategies. In my experience, this method is particularly penetrating to the minds of residents and serves as an excellent introductory way to the subject matter under discussion. But perhaps most importantly, this session brings a joyful teaching environment in which one would improve not only his/her diagnostic skills but also recognize one’s clinical weaknesses. I can imagine how many residents were indirectly impacted by this teaching approach. It provides the model on which I and many of my colleagues practice when teaching residents.

When it came to diagnostic skills, I have set the bar both virtually and in real clinical settings. Students/residents are strongly advised to perform complete and thorough examinations. As dermatology is morphology, there is “no ‘hide-n’-seek’ affair”. One needs to examine everywhere because one may miss something that is more important to the diagnosis than what the patient may be showing you. My approach when residents tell me “I can’t tell if it is psoriasis or eczema” is “did you look in the gluteal cleft?” This will ingrain in the students’/residents’ minds the need to always examine the gluteal region when suspecting psoriasis. I encourage trainees to enlist their diagnostic possibilities based on what they see. Sounds simple, but this complete approach to the patient minimizes misdiagnoses, uncovers other possible issues, and works so well. My statement “be wrong but think loudly and defend your diagnoses” is frequently used. This creates an environment of excitement, curiosity and passion for further learning and scholarship. Also, it stimulates critical thinking in future educational experiences.

Of all the things that I treasure and preach for during all these instances is bedside manner. In the exam room, I teach both patients and residents at the same time. I ensure that my actions are always as instructive as my words. Sounds simple, but this complete approach to the patient minimizes misdiagnoses, uncovers other possible issues, and works so well. My statement “be wrong but think loudly and defend your diagnoses” is frequently used. This creates an environment of excitement, curiosity and passion for further learning and scholarship. Also, it stimulates critical thinking in future educational experiences.

As a teacher and with the advent of the information super-highway, my role is to guide and provide access to information.
rather than acting as the primary source of information. In all teaching settings, I underscore the value of “searching for knowledge” when we learn to find answers to challenging questions. To build up on old and construct new knowledge, I provide the opportunity to discover and practice skills in authentic situations. Access to hands-on activities and allowing adequate time and space to use taught materials that reinforce the lesson being studied creates an opportunity for individual discovery and construction of knowledge to occur.

Equally important to self-discovery is having the opportunity to study things that are meaningful and relevant to one’s future and interests. Developing a curriculum around student interests fosters intrinsic motivation and stimulates the passion to learn. One way to take learning in a direction relevant to student interest is to invite student dialogue about the lessons and units of study. Given the opportunity for input, students generate ideas and set goals that make for much richer activities than I could have created or imagined myself. When students have ownership in the curriculum, they are motivated to work hard and master the skills necessary to reach their goals.

Having taught generations of students and post-graduate trainees, I have been presented with a unique community of learners that vary not only in abilities, but also in learning styles. My role as a teacher in almost all cases is to supply the tools with which to cultivate one’s own garden of knowledge. To accomplish this goal, I will teach the needs so that all learners can feel capable and successful. I have integrated a basic science curriculum that reinforces themes relevant to daily practices and infuse in the minds of learners challenging questions and the desire to be active rather than proactive learners.

Further more and for me, teaching provides an opportunity for continual learning and growth. One of my hopes as an educator is to instill a love of learning in my students, as I share my own passion for learning with them. I feel there is a need for compassionate, strong, and dedicated individuals who are excited about giving and giving abundantly. In our competitive milieu, it is important not only to deliver a solid education, but to work with someone who is aware of and is sensitive to the individual needs of the learners. I am such a person and will always strive to be within a team the best educator that I can be. Dr. Edmond Shwayri once told me during the “Chairman’s Round” after an impeccable case presentation when I was a fourth year medical student – “don’t live in your laurels” – a quote which inspired me forever as a student, resident and teacher educator.

In conclusion, If I have reached out and touched at least one person per annum over the course of nearly a quarter of a century of teaching at this outstanding department, I realize with joy coupled with humility that I have reached out and touched the lives of many, many people, and, in return, they too have reached out and enriched my world of dermatology.

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