Educators are people first, and like most people we are shaped and molded by our personal backgrounds and educational experiences. My approach to teaching and philosophy of education is shaped by the fact that I have always been a non-traditional college student. I lack all the traditional experiences of an undergraduate fresh from home on a “normal” campus, in “normal” classrooms, and all their “normal” extra-curricular activities. My early formative years after high school were spent in the U.S. Army, and of those I spent eight of my first ten years in Germany.

When I graduated in 1975 my practical goal was to become a state police officer, which I intended to reach by first completing a three-year enlistment as a soldier and Military Policeman. I had plenty of opportunity to attend college courses, but for seven years (I kept re-enlisting) I felt that college was where the “really smart people” go, and that I could best advance my career through hands-on experience and training courses rather than attending college. Finally, in 1982, it became very clear that if I wanted to get ahead in my military or professional career I had better start attending college.

Once I finally entered the classroom, several misconceptions I had long held about college began to disappear. First was the feeling that I somehow was not qualified to attend college, I saw that most of the others in my classes were just like me. A second misconception was that I could not “really learn” in the classroom the same way I could learn through practical experience and specialized training. I also quickly learned that unlike High School, no one forces you to attend, that attending college courses meant there were other things at other places that I was not doing, that in order to obtain a college education I had to sacrifice other attractive alternatives – like a social life. And finally, one of the most important lessons I learned from my early college experience was that your results reflected the effort you put into them, that good grades were a reflection of considerable effort and commitment, and that trying to merely “wing it” was not going to succeed in higher education. These early lessons are reflected in my outlook on higher education and my perception of the role an educator plays in the learning process.

- Knowledge of the subject matter. One of the most important requirements of an educator is to remain up-to-date on the topic they intend to teach to students. If the students get the impression that their instructor does not know what they are teaching, or that the instructor is twenty years behind the times, the students will simply “tune him out” and there will be no effective learning taking place.

- Multiple instruction strategies. In college, students expect their instructor to be as up-to-date in the use of technology in the classroom as the material being covered. In practical terms, the instructor must integrate different teaching methods, challenge the students both in and out of the classroom, and provide the basis for an active learning environment. I try to use the instruction strategy that best fits the situation, whether it is lecture, PowerPoint presentation, video, guest speaker, or practical exercise. Often times multiple approaches are necessary in a single course since the subject matter changes as the semester progresses.

- Adapting instruction for individual needs. The students entering the classroom today are very different from my own personal experiences twenty years ago. It is important to remember that students all come from different backgrounds and have different learning abilities. To merely teach in one fashion to a majority of the students in the class means that there may be several students left behind who are not learning the material. It is not necessary to “dumb down” the material to fit the lowest common denominator; however it is necessary for the instructor to recognize when some students are not learning, and adjust or adapt the instructional methods accordingly.

- Motivation. It would be nice to expect every student to appear in class at every session, fully prepared and eager to learn. Instructors who merely stand behind a lectern and read from the text quickly lose whatever motivation the student’s may have had for that class. The instructor must remain motivated to teach and transfer that motivation to the students in order for them to really learn. The instructor must be motivated to teach, motivated about the material, and be able to transfer that motivation to the student’s interest in learning the material.

- Communication skills. This is a critical component for any instructor to have. In a way, instructors are really like actors performing in front of the students. There are a variety of tools and props to use in getting the material across, but it is the knowledge, passion, and commitment of the instructor to the material and most important their skill in getting these elements across to
the students which creates an effective learning environment. In addition, the instructor must ensure there is a proper environment for two-way communication, that any student, asking any question, will feel comfortable in asking their question and receiving a proper reply. Students who feel they will be ignored, belittled, ridiculed, or embarrassed – either by the instructor or by their fellow students – will not ask questions, and effective learning will not take place in that environment.

- **Assessment of student learning.** This is another important component of the learning process. If any instructor covers a block of material and believes they have done a great job – but 80% of the students flunked the test, then something is obviously wrong. Either the instructor did not properly get the material across to the students, or the testing methods did not properly test their knowledge of the material. The methods of assessment, the testing materials, must be structured in such a way that the student is able to show by their responses that they actually know the material.

- **Professional commitment and responsibility.** Students must feel that their instructor is as committed to their learning as they are (if not more) and this places several responsibilities on them. The instructor must be always prepared to answer questions about the material, always prepared for class and cannot let outside pressures or distractions interfere with their classroom instruction, and the students must feel that they are able to communicate openly with their instructor. The instructor must continue to seek out opportunities to better themselves, to improve their teaching methods, adapt new ideas and concepts into their instruction, and remain committed to their role in the learning process.