This quote from St Augustine inspires my teaching philosophy. Teaching allows me to help students ‘travel’ not only out of a geographic zone but also out of a personal comfort zone. My role as a teacher is to serve as an advocate, guide and mentor to students on a journey that will take them to a new level in their professional career. For the past 8 years I have led the Clinical Nurse Specialist program at UIW, a master’s program in an online format. Graduate nurses who complete this program are qualified to take a national certification exam as Adult/Gero Clinical Nurse Specialists and are recognized by the Texas Board of Nursing as Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRN) with diagnostic and prescriptive privileges. CNS graduates can serve as primary care providers as well as leaders in large hospital systems.

I use several methods to engage student in my regular classes as well as the elective classes that I teach. I encourage students to develop relationships with others in the class, create a learning environment that is active and creative (and sometimes fun), and create educational experiences that are challenging and enriching.

Most of my teaching is online. Student engagement is a challenge in a regular classroom but an online format offers additional challenges. I believe students must know their faculty and fellow students in order to become engaged in learning. Therefore, even though online, I meet with my class at the beginning of every semester on campus and provide a meal. I am fortunate because I teach 3 sequential courses so we are strangers only in August and know each other well by the January and May orientations. An area on the online discussion board allows each student to share a little about themselves.

The discussion board facilitates engagement in additional ways. Assignments with faculty generated questions require finding 3 additional sources from peer reviewed journals so students learn quickly where to find reliable information, analyze it and synthesize into the discussion. I actively participate in the discussion board 5-6 times a week by asking more probing questions about a topic, challenging some assumptions or providing recognition of a job well done. Students are encouraged to use examples from their own varied experiences to share with classmates as they have collectively many years of experience in a wide variety of areas which enriches the discussion.

Each clinical course includes a clinical experience with a preceptor. I visit students and preceptors in the clinical site at least 2 visits for each student per semester and allow time for one-on-one consultations as needed. I meet with students in the evening, on Saturdays at any place that may be convenient for them – sometimes Dallas or Houston or a local Starbucks. Since I am a first generation college graduate with English as a second language, I understand the challenges of straddling two cultures so I work with students so they can be successful.
I allow students to choose their own clinical sites as long as they meet course objectives. In 2010 when the earthquake hit Haiti a group of 3 students wanted to go to Haiti to do their clinical hours. Since their request fit well with the mission of UIW, I arranged for a preceptor that met TX Board of Nursing requirements—a physician from Austin, and found a disaster nursing organization that was sending nurses into the area and after the contracts were secured, 3 students went to Haiti. They shared their experiences related to lack of supplies, lack of sanitary conditions and working with international teams on the discussion board so that all the students benefited from their international experience.

I have developed some creative and challenging assignments that force students out of their comfort zone although I walk beside them the entire way to make sure they succeed. One of the more challenging assignments is a research project they need to complete from IRB to writing an abstract to submit to a national organization. Although stressful, all students complete this assignment on time and 100% of their abstracts have been accepted at national conferences. I also guide them to find funding to finance the trip. Students have said attending and presenting at these conferences has been a transformational experience—it makes them feel like professionals. When I see previous graduates at subsequent conferences it tells me they are engaged in the profession for life-long learning. Other assignments include developing marketing brochures instead of talking about the role of the CNS and, reflecting on the appropriateness of conflict management styles used in an assigned movie (Antz) rather than reading about conflict management styles.

I also teach 2 elective courses, both are interdisciplinary and hybrid. In my Study Abroad courses I make sure group assignments include a mixture of nursing and pharmacy students so they can learn about each other. Other activities include a shared meal, shared assignments, shared discussion boards, and, to some extent, shared planning for the trip. In the palliative care course I have used high fidelity simulation to engage students in some of the emotions experienced as they witness a patient death. I have also started showing some movies dealing with death and dying followed by a class and individual reflection.

Even though about 80% of my teaching is online, I know each student by name and even know pet names by the end of the semester. I value students’ experience and encourage them to share it with their classmates.

As for professional accomplishments, I was honored to receive the Sigma Theta Tau Award for excellence as a clinician. I was also honored to be nominated last year by former students for the NACNS Educator of the year award although I was not chosen. I was proud to receive grant funding and supervise the renovation of a little house that became St Philip of Jesus Health Ministry. In my clinical practice in hospice, a proud professional moment is witnessing a good death. In teaching, my proudest moments are meeting with graduates and learning about all of the great things they are doing in their new role in their respective settings.