Developing an Approach to Teaching

Key Questions
1. What are my goals for children's learning?
2. What is my "approach" to teaching, that is, to helping children learn, in order to achieve those goals?

Background Orientation:
There exists a wide array of approaches to teaching that have developed over time and, unfortunately, there seems to exist an even wider array of terminology referring to them. The entire array can be confusing to understand. As you continue on your path of developing your own approach to teaching, it is important to begin understanding the "territory" of pedagogical approaches and where you hope to position yourself. One basic way of conceptualizing the array is along a continuum ranging from a high degree of teacher control over the aspects of teaching at one extreme (often referred to as teacher-centered approaches) to a relatively high degree of student control over the aspects of learning (often referred to as student-centered approaches), with a wide range of shades of shared control in between. I offer below my own rough representation of some of the more widely known teaching approaches along that continuum:

High Teacher Control	Shared Control	High Student Control
Direct teaching	Guided discussion	Discussion
Presentation	Guided discovery	Discovery learning
Concept teaching	Guided learning centres	Open lrng. centres
Lecture, demonstration	Cooperative learning	Informal education
Teacher, questioning	Well-defined problem	Ill-defined problem
Individualized instruction	Constructivist teaching	Open education
	Negotiating the curriculum	

At different points across the continuum, the roles and expectations of both teachers and students differ. On the teacher-centered side the roles of teachers and pupils tend to be mutually exclusive, with the teacher being directive and decision-making while the student's role is to respond appropriately to the teacher's initiatives. As we move across the continuum, students tend to share more and more in the teacher's traditional active, decision-making, and determining role (as both have a say in determining topics, materials, learning activities, and even assessing learning). Correspondingly, the teacher's role often shifts into that of helping students learn the abilities to take on more responsibility for their learning in order to foster eventual independence as a learner.

A major reason for the development of such a proliferation of approaches to teaching is the attempt to foster different kinds of outcomes in learners that are valued by different educators. For example, teacher-centered approaches are strong at fostering outcomes in students such as the ability to follow directions well, to listen carefully, to foster mastery of targeted skills and knowledge, etc. On the other hand, shared or student-centered approaches are strong at fostering outcomes such as independence, creativity, social collaboration, etc. While most teachers certainly endorse more student-centered outcomes for learners, most teaching has tended to remain more teacher-directed since teachers often do not encounter concrete examples of student-centered approaches. As you develop your own approach to teaching, it will be important to create coherence between your goals for the kind of learners you hope to foster on the one hand and your repertoire of teaching approaches on the other.

The QEP, while not prohibiting any approaches to teaching, has in general encouraged teaching approaches that tend toward the shared areas of the continuum. The rationale is at least three-fold. (1) Much research shows that more active and determining learning processes are more effective for learning. (2) More shared or student-centered approaches are seen as more suitable for fostering some of the learner outcomes and competencies targeted in the QEP. (3) More shared or student-centered approaches are seen as fostering integration of the curriculum.

The QEP also seeks to foster a "differentiated pedagogy" on the part of teachers. That is, as opposed to providing all students with the same lesson, the same materials, the same time frame, the same goals, the same evaluation, and so on, the QEP encourages teachers to approach their teaching in a way that differentiates it for the diversity among students—academic levels, learning styles and intelligences, social abilities, and so on. Such a development is seen as important for creating greater equality of opportunity for success among students, sort of like creating a pluralistic pedagogy for a pluralistic student population. It is possible to differentiate pedagogy across the entire continuum of teaching approaches, but how it is done varies a great deal across the continuum. That is, on the teacher-centered side, it is the teacher who plans and determines learning to address at least some of the differences (such as individualized instruction), often adding significantly to her workload. The shared and student-centered approaches usually allow more "space" for students to determine level of difficulty of the task, how to approach it, how to demonstrate learning, even time frame and learning environment. Thus, to a large extent students create their own differentiation of learning for themselves. Teachers can learn a great deal about learner diversity in this way and also have an important role to play in helping students become aware of possible variations open to them to enhance the success of their learning.

As a result of this recent curriculum reform in Quebec, many teachers and schools are engaged in a process of learning to shift their teaching approaches toward the shared area of the continuum. (Note that many elementary teachers were already successfully using such teaching approaches prior to the reform. Indeed, such examples of effective teaching and learning formed a great deal of the base and rationale for the curriculum reform.) Such a process means that students are also faced with a change in roles and expectations, and in some situations are still learning the abilities needed for playing such roles.

You will be developing your own approach to teaching in this context of reform. Each of you will have access to different models of teaching, depending on your CT and the school you are in. However, the ideal goal for this term is that, after mastering your CT's approach to teaching, you will be able to develop to some extent toward the kind of teacher you envision yourself becoming.

Readings:
EDEE 353, number 1 (as a look at effective teaching that transcends particular approaches to teaching) and numbers 19-25 (that survey approaches to teaching in the shared area of the continuum).

Task:
Articulate the principles and approach to teaching that you have learned and/or would like to try to follow as a beginning teacher. These may reflect a great deal what you have been practicing during student teaching, they may differ to some extent, or they may be a mixture of both. An important aspect of the task is to create a framework for grouping the principles and techniques (rather than just creating a random "grocery list" of items). My general framework above might help for starters, but you will get many ideas from the readings for this task. Also try to place those principles and techniques within various schools of thought and practical approaches, e.g., teacher-centered and direct teaching vs. shared, cooperative learning. Such an attempt should help reveal the choices open to a teacher, including yourself, in approaching teaching. This statement should be relatively concise and clear since it will become part of your teaching portfolio. And it should, of course, be supplemented with appropriate artifacts to whatever extent possible, e.g., learning materials you have developed, samples of children's work, pictures of classroom set-up and/or children at work, supporting means such as bulletin boards, etc..

Means:
• The readings will provide a source of reflection on what you are doing and other possibilities open to you.
• Over a period of time, reflect on your daily approach to teaching, particularly as you have more leeway to begin developing your own approach. Try to capture your approach in many specific interactions with the class and with individuals and analyze what patterns you are actually following.
• You may ask for help from others with the above step. Your CT is an obvious source of feedback, but you may also invite others to observe you.
• Observe at least one other teacher sufficiently in order to have some basis for comparison and contrast in analyzing yourself and imagining how you would like to be.