

Teaching Philosophy

In addition to being a teacher, I am a Jersey-born urbanite, a brother and an uncle, a fan of '90s R&B music and the films of Frank Capra. These facets of myself may not always be relevant to my teaching, but they are intrinsically a part of me and shape my experiences in and out of the classroom. Naturally, the same is true of my students; each student comes to my classroom with beliefs, interests, and experiences that set them apart from their classmates. A core component of my teaching is to acknowledge these individual differences, to incorporate them into my lessons when possible, and to always remain aware that each student will have a unique relationship to course materials. It is only through exploring these differences that we can have productive and illuminating conversations about literature.

It's essential to me that students make personal connections to the literature we read, that they don't simply read the words on the page and forget them by the end of the semester. My lesson plans are often designed to help students have a more immersive relationship to course texts. For example, when we discuss characterization in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, students are put into small groups and asked to perform a tableau of an important scene from the play in front of the class; that is, they recreate a scene and freeze in place, making sure that their body language and facial expressions convey the feelings of the character in that moment. In the conversations that follow, students explain their choices and recognize how embodying that character has forced them to think deeply about the character's feelings and motivations. Later in the semester, we read Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and visit the university's Center for Computer-Aided Design, where my students put on virtual reality headgear that allows them to see the garret space Jacobs occupied for seven years. When students read about her experience, they express mild disbelief that she spent so long in the space; when they physically see the space through the VR headset, they are visibly shocked and often remark that they could never live in such conditions. These reactions indicate that they are making connections between their own lives and the text, an important step in helping them recognize the value of reading literature.

I design writing assignments to not only have students think deeply about course texts, but to also consider how our course themes resonate with their own experiences. I typically do this by assigning creative work for one of my major writing assignments. For example, after teaching a unit on the history of the fairy tale genre, I ask students to use the knowledge of fairy tale structure they learned from readings and lectures to write their own fairy tales in which they describe a time they overcame a challenge. The students transform their experiences into tales using the tropes and plot devices they've learned in class. In the rationales that accompany their tales, students

showcase how the assignment helped them better understand the course's primary objective of identifying how writers can use fantastic elements to discuss real-world issues.

I get to know my students through a series of activities that focus on their experiences both in and out of the classroom. Twice a semester I meet with each student in office hours to discuss major writing assignments. During these conferences, I make time to also discuss their overall experience in the class and, should they be willing to discuss it, their semester overall. These conferences are productive in multiple ways; since incorporating them into my course, my students perform better on their written assignments and participate more often in class. Through question roll call, conferences, and a relaxed and congenial atmosphere in the classroom, my students are active, engaged participants, willing to express themselves and able to connect their own experiences with the course materials.

I not only make it a priority to know my students as individuals, but to make sure we are using our learning in class to better understand our local communities. A core tenet of my course design is engagement with the local community: in my Rhetoric course, students were asked to design a project that would benefit the residents of Iowa City, especially those in disadvantaged communities; in my current class on queer of color literature and history, students are working directly with the local LGBTQ Iowa Archives and Library to expand the archives of local queer life in our city. Diversity, equity, and inclusion cannot be theoretical topics we discuss only inside our classrooms. I believe strongly that we must apply our learning to the communities around us, especially when we have the privilege that comes with working and studying in an institution of higher learning.

A major joy—and challenge—of teaching is starting each semester with a new group of students who will respond differently to course materials. With my style of teaching, I try to ensure that each student, each semester will both read and compose texts that resonate with them beyond their time in my class. While over the course of my career I may have hundreds of students come through my classroom, students will have only one experience of my class. It's my responsibility to make that experience worthwhile and meaningful, and to remember that each student arrives with a unique background and set of values that enrich my classroom.