

How and Why I Teach

My teaching is guided by a series of interconnected pedagogical tenets that are fluid, malleable, and evolving. These tenets speak to what I see as both "problematic" and "productive" learning experiences in the classroom. In juxtaposing these estranged ideals, I hope to show how an acknowledgement of one perspective helps define the power and utility of the other:

First, *learning is not about grades; teaching is about cultivating a love of knowledge for its own sake.* I begin with this tenet because it carries most weight in my pedagogical practices. Often students come to the classroom with a certain academic agenda in mind, one that has more to do with pre-professionalization and grade point average than with intellectual growth or excitement. Though I would never argue that grades are unnecessary or that they cannot motivate individuals in productive ways, my goal is always that students grow to appreciate the acquisition of knowledge. I emphasize depth over breadth in my curriculum and yet still urge learners to seek out complementary course materials that will fuel their semester-long engagement. My primary objective, in other words, is that students realize that the purpose of attending a class like "Titillating Terrors in Early Modern Drama" is not to earn an "A" but rather to gain a sense of what sorts of fears were performed, manifested, and confronted by 16th and 17th century theater and how an examination of these fears might inform our own contemporary terrors and anxieties.

Second, *learning is not about confirmation and comfort; teaching is about encouraging diversity of thought and understanding.* I often begin my undergraduate class meetings by having students respond to a question from their reading that provokes one of two immediate emotional responses. These responses initially divide the class, and I require that students sit according to their polarized positions. This face-to-face meeting of the minds across a seminar table can be unsettling, but it creates an atmosphere in which students must defend their ideas using careful critical thinking and analysis. For instance, my most satisfying moments come when, halfway through a discussion about whether Richard III is a sympathetic character, a few students switch sides midst argument. As they reclaim seats on the other side of the table, I know they've been forced to confront their belief systems and to make evaluative assessments about their perceptions of the world and their places in it.

Third, *learning is not about a solitary encounter with texts and information; teaching is about cooperation, connection, and conversation with the people and materials that bring knowledge to life.* While my courses strive for a certain depth of content, I also promote interdisciplinary learning that situates the information I teach within a broader context. A seminar in early modern British poetry, for example, might be considered in conjunction with continental trends in science and art or in relation to British imperial endeavors in the East. Providing this sort of cross-fertilization requires that I make my classroom a space of invitation, and I often incorporate colleagues, speakers, or media to augment our discussions about writing, literature, or culture. I try to model a policy of cooperation even in the way I conceive of a course, and I encourage my students to look

beyond "specialists" to the intellectual support of their peers. Throughout the semester, we set aside time for in-class workshops and on-line discussions during which students offer each other collaborative feedback on their writing and thinking.

Fourth, *learning is not about the passive absorption of facts and figures; teaching is about modeling an active process of rigorous, critical inquiry.* Almost all the courses I teach require that students participate in some sort of formal academic research, and I arrange my syllabi so that learners read not only primary materials but also consult secondary critical resources and complementary digital media. I infuse my courses with available electronic technology and ask that students perform digital research using tools like Early English Books Online, JSTOR, and Project Muse. These technologies augment more traditional research methods and force students to consider the sometimes fraught relationship between "new" media and "old" literature. Additionally, I often make use of on-line subject/course guides that serve as interactive visual aids not only for class discussions about early modern history and culture but also for conversations about research methodology and the ethics of good scholarship.

Fifth, *learning is not about uniformity; teaching is about realizing and embracing different ways of knowing.* My classrooms are comprised of many different students, each with their own unique learning style. Some students are linguistically oriented and others are spatial thinkers. Some students are outgoing, cooperative, and engaging, while some need more time for individual reflection and discovery. I strive to quickly grasp the learning styles and personalities in my classroom and to embrace this diversity. By appreciating all of my students for what they bring to our intellectual endeavor, I hope to create a space that affirms and respects each of them for who they are. This environment transforms my classroom into a place for productive conversation where students can be honest with themselves and others and further cultivate their sense of individualism and integrity.

Sixth, I would argue that *learning is not all about the short-term; teaching is about constant reflection, development, and redefinition.* As I encourage my students to have broader goals than just "A" papers, I am reminded that teaching too is about having a broader vision than just one seminar. To this end, I am willing to watch my class transform via the specific needs and desires of my students. I never hesitate to let students take classroom discussions in fruitful directions not necessarily on my agenda for the day. I also look for those "teachable moments" that are never scripted neatly into a plan but that are crucial to learning. Likewise, I consider myself a reflective practitioner who evaluates the successes and failures of each class meeting. For example, I give my students mid-term evaluations that ask them to think both about their own efforts and to consider my role in their learning experience. Based on this kind of feedback, I often alter my syllabus mid-semester after considering what has or has not been working for my students. Good teaching requires self-assessment and, by modeling this practice for students, they come to know how important self-examination is to any learning process.

Last, *learning is not about facts that have no place in the world; teaching is about relating critical thinking to everyday life and work.* As a student, the world of Shakespeare, Donne, or Milton can often seem distant from "the real world." One of my goals is to bridge the gap between academic and nonacademic life, the past and the present. The rhetorical and analytical skills I teach in the classroom make my students better thinkers who can articulate new and interesting ideas. I explain to undergraduates that whether they are pursuing careers in business, medicine, art, or law, they will have to be able to read inquisitively, speak clearly, argue compellingly, and write fluently. I encourage them to imagine, even as freshmen, how their current academic engagements shape and structure their professional goals. I also remind them of their privileged positions as college students and of their unique capacity to influence the world in tremendous ways both during and after their post-secondary education.