

Teaching Philosophy

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Above all, I value ethics of care in my teaching and learning. Nel Noddings's words have resonated with me for many years: *"We are both free—that which I do, I do—and bound—I might do far better if you reach out to help me and far, far worse if you abuse, taunt, or ignore me."* This is why and how I choose to teach, with care. This care manifests itself in my methods, which include asking students to share their knowledges and skills with me and with their colleagues, inquiring of my students what they need and want, and asking them to assess those needs and wants within the context of larger social and cultural forces. I see myself engaged in a relationship with students, in which we both have something to offer, something to gain, and something to lose. I value them as individuals who are on their own learning trajectories, and I present myself to them as an individual on an intersecting path. I see the classroom as communal space that we share only briefly and in the larger context of our everyday lives.

What beliefs and theories mark my successful teaching?

I taught before I had a teaching philosophy, as I suspect many graduate teaching assistants do. But in my second year as a PhD student, I took a wonderful online course from Dr. Richard Gebhardt, who had recently retired, but was still willing to share his knowledge about "advanced writing pedagogy" with my cohort. Dr. Gebhardt required a rigorous notebook, to which I return regularly, in which we explored pedagogies and theories about composition and writing—learning through reading and writing, reflecting, and practicing. One of his first assignments was to read his 2003 Keynote address, "Pedagogies and Practicalities in Writing," in which he argued that we must think critically about our pedagogies, and attend to our practicalities with a conscious orientation because, "many instructional preferences are fuzzy and at best semi conscious, [so] it is quite easy to use contradictory approaches in the same class" (5). Dr. Gebhardt did more than advise us that theory and practice are two sides of one coin—he demonstrated that to us by making us work to infuse our practices with our theories and our theories with our practices in the writing classroom. His model of engaged learning through reading, writing, reflecting, and practice has had a significant impact on my own work as a composition teacher.

In the year following the course with Dr. Gebhardt, I had the opportunity to teach an intensive first-year writing course, which attended to the needs of the least privileged of the students entering the university. At the same time, I was asked to mentor seven new graduate teaching assistants in the first-year writing program, who would be teaching more advanced versions of my course. This contrast of students and of teaching situations taught me several important things about myself as a teacher. In many ways the developing writers of the first year class and the new

graduate teaching assistants shared similar anxieties about embarking on a new learning adventure, about unknown conventions of their new environments, about differing expectations, about balancing challenges and operating independently in an environment that seemed similar but in which they were playing a role foreign to them. In other ways, however, these new students were very different. While new graduate students perceived themselves as writers, new first-year developing writers did not. In fact, they considered themselves to already be failing in their written work, even by virtue of having been placed in the intensive introduction to academic writing course. This self-perception is a major hurdle for many of my first-year writing students and much of my teaching is motivated by a desire to help them develop their own sense of authorship, to help them realize that they, too, had a right to speak and write about their experiences and ideas.

How do I create a positive learning environment?

To me, a positive learning environment is one in which all of the participants can contribute to the processes of learning. I encourage discussion and debate about current issues that are local and important to students. Before students write, they read and explore contemporary issues (campus policies, community controversies, hometown problems and solutions), which we then discuss in groups and as a class to consider all positions on the matter, and the beliefs and values that support those positions. Once students have had a chance to express their differing beliefs, to respond to one another and to consider the role of values and beliefs, I encourage them to reflect on their own attitudes and underlying world views through free writing and then through more formal iterations of writing assignments. I promote peer interaction through more traditional peer review exercises, but also through newer modalities such as discussion boards and digital spaces. Students participate in the building of pages to our course management shell. They work independently, in pairs, in groups, and as a full class. Writing is an integral element of our everyday work in the classroom. I inquire of them what they understand of my feedback of their papers, of our peer review techniques, of our assignments—and I take their answers into account as I flexibly steer the course toward our learning objectives. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes “yearning” in the classroom, and it is this yearning toward which I direct my attention and my students’ attentions.

What types of outcomes do I want for my students?

I want my students to be able to participate actively and effectively in the discourses that occur in the spaces that they inhabit, from the discourse of the academy to public discourses that shape our culture. I have found that rhetorical theory offers students both an analytical framework and a skill set that can help them to develop critical analysis and practical approaches to writing projects. From grammar to revision my writing assignments ask students to engage in the process of invention, of audience and purpose analysis, and of employing persuasive techniques. Beyond providing them with the vocabulary of *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*, and *kairos*, rhetorical

theory demonstrates to students that there are techniques in writing processes and compositions that can translate from one situation to the next. I ask students to “read” texts and speeches with attention to how others use these techniques, to experience the impact that these effects have on them as readers and listeners, and then to experiment with devices in their own work. I teach rhetorical moves as both a skill set for effective writing in all genres, but also as a framework for critical analysis of the texts and visuals that circulate in our society and play a role in whom we are shaped to be. Rhetorical analysis serves students well in their endeavors to enter academic and public discourses.

How do I know when I am effectively teaching?

I see myself as a teacher who is always learning, accumulating knowledge and experiences from my students and my colleagues. I reflect often on my teaching methods and my philosophy, and see it as changing and changeable. I am perpetually self-assessing and I promote self-assessment processes for my students. From the basics of revising, editing, and proofreading to contemplating who they want to be as writers in the spaces and years to come, I believe that reflective practice combined with an awareness of our potential to grow and develop is essential to reaching learning objectives and then reaching beyond them. This is a belief that I share generously with my students and my colleagues, with the hope that it will help us individually and collectively travel along our own trajectories.