

Tyler Cornelius Teaching Philosophy

APPROACH

When I first began taking courses as an undergraduate student, I was interested in *everything*: philosophy and history, ecology and geology, music theory and art, economics and politics. While not all my peers shared my earnest (if somewhat naïve) notion that one actually could study everything, most of them shared my enthusiasm for new things and a newfound sense of independence. With this freedom of young adulthood came the accompanying idea that the world was bigger than I previously thought, it was open to study, and, most importantly, open to question. For me, as is true for many, the college experience was my introduction to critical thinking and self-reflection. In learning about others, college was an opportunity to re-think one's place in the world, question one's understandings, and revisit what one thinks one knows.

Now, as an instructor at a University, I relish being a part of this process. When I reflect on my favorite moments as a teacher, I think of students first expressing excitement about a particular idea, discovering a favorite book, or sharing how class was relevant to their own lives. When I first began graduate student teaching I adopted a teaching model that highlighted controversial issues relevant to the course. In these classes I sought to integrate questions of social-justice into the content of the course by drawing attention to voices often silenced or marginalized. At their most basic, my goals were to have a subtle but lasting effect on students by exposing them to new information and ideas. In "teaching to transgress" I hoped to make students more aware of how different experiences produced different values, politics, and worldviews.

Over the last several years this approach developed into something different. While I still see great value in exposing students to diverse curricula, I now believe that my teaching is most effective when I focus my energy almost entirely on the *process* of learning and thinking. While I always refrained from pushing particular opinions in class, my students at the University of Michigan taught me to value the most contentious moments and uncomfortable conversations. By discussing ideas with students "on their own terms," my classes have become more than just a chance to cover specific material or engage in a single lesson-plan. Instead, students in this type of learning community engage in a project of building a toolbox of analytical skills that will extend beyond the scope of one particular class.

PRACTICE

When teaching a history or American Studies course, first and foremost I prepare students for analytical thinking by giving them a solid foundation of material to draw from. As a historian, my goal is to make events of the past meaningful by discussing them in multiple contexts. To meet this goal I most often use lecture to deliver factual information, historical context, and historiographic interpretation, and use other exercises

(small group discussion, written reflection, multimedia presentations, group projects, etc) to promote absorption and application of that material by the students. To emphasize that *content* is essential, I begin assessing students with detail-oriented identification and essay questions that ask students to assemble, analyze, and interrogate concepts and ideas. In this realm my approach to student learning is very traditional. I expect my students to study harder than they are accustomed to, but I give them every opportunity to be successful. I believe that student learning is maximized when both student and instructor have high expectations of what can be accomplished. In course evaluations, students consistently tell me that my courses are some of their most challenging, but also their most rewarding.

While the traditional approach of lecturing can work for many students, I vary in-class activities to reach other students who learn in different ways. If I choose to lecture with a power-point presentation, I make sure that I use a different exercise when repeating or reemphasizing important points. Typically I will organize a class into twenty-minute sections, to keep students attention and reinforce the most critical concepts or ideas. For example, in an introductory American Studies lecture on changing notions of citizenship, I might use a series of historical photographs and ask students to apply an idea within my lecture (for example Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined community'). By utilizing a wide archive of primary sources and popular cultural forms – including film, literature, television, music, and art, I strive to present ideas to students in ways that are engaging and relevant to their everyday lives. Because my approach is decidedly "learner-centered," students often respond with enthusiasm and appreciation. I was very flattered (and elated) when a group of my students nominated me for the Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award, which I received from UM's Rackham Graduate School in 2004.

GOALS

As I quickly discovered, there is always room for improvement when it comes to teaching. For my immediate future, my goals are twofold. First, as I continue to develop as a teacher, I hope to make improvements in really *knowing* the students – to be better able to "meet them where they are" and craft content that will build a bridge between historical practice and their everyday experiences. I plan to do this by making myself familiar with the issues and topics at the heart of the undergraduate experience. Paying attention to student newspapers, on-line communities, student events and organizations is one way to do this, and having conversations with other faculty will help me form strategies to get a better sense of who the students really are. My second goal is to continue to raise expectations, around the board. Not only do I want students to expect that my course will require their best effort, but they should expect to remember more of the course material, know how to ask more and better questions of that material, and ultimately, they should expect the content, the instructor, and the class to relate to the world outside the classroom in interesting and surprising ways. I plan to do this by addressing teaching issues incrementally, not once a semester or once a year, but slowly and gradually in every lecture and assignment.