

### Statement of Teaching Philosophy

*Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances...A performance is a dialectic of "flow," that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and "reflexivity," in which the central meanings, values, and goals of a culture are seen "in action," as they shape and explain behavior. We will know each other better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.*

- Victor Turner<sup>1</sup>

I believe that student learning in anthropology can be metaphorically related to performance. Both are processes; performances are often based on preparation and rehearsals, and are constantly changing and being improvised, just as student learning involves practicing the use of analytical tools and is always evolving and never static. Both performance and student learning emphasize communication; while performance illuminates the audience-performer connection, student learning exists in a nexus of dialogue between students and teacher, and amongst students themselves. Performance and student learning are both embodied in that performances are often carried out through the use of the body, just as student learning in anthropology can be embodied through the actual practice of anthropological methods. Lastly, both performance and student learning can also be transformative. Performances not only reflect but can also shape society; in the same way that student learning in anthropology can transform students' perceptions of themselves and others, enabling them to become better global citizens.

Process: One of my primary goals in teaching anthropology is to develop the critical thinking and analytical skills of the students. Like movements or words in performance that are improvised to adjust to changes in the audience or setting, I want my students to be able to think on their feet and automatically engage critically with any information that they are presented. The tools of analysis that they will employ can then also be applied to new situations outside of the classroom. In both introductory and upper level anthropology courses, this goal can be realized through critical readings of ethnographies as well as short newspaper or journal articles on relevant current-day issues that demonstrate a particular anthropological concept or debate.

Communication: Another major goal that I have for my students is for them to learn to be open to communication, especially cross-culturally. Anthropology can be most succinctly defined as the study of human diversity over time and throughout space. In this regard, courses in anthropology make students aware of this diversity, and the similarities and differences that exist amongst cultures, including their own. Establishing ground rules for the free exchange of ideas in the classroom, allows students to learn to listen to others. I hope that by the end of the courses, students can see the role of

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<sup>1</sup> 1980, From a Planning Meeting for the World Conference on Ritual and Performance, quoted in Introduction to Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (eds), *By Means of Performance* (1)

anthropology in enabling cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, and take this lesson with them outside the classroom to guide culturally sensitive interactions with others. I aim to achieve this goal by often using small group work settings in the classroom, as well as group presentations, both encouraging the students to work together. I also learn from my students just as they learn from me in these classroom dialogues.

**Embodiment:** Allowing the students the opportunity to actually practice some of the anthropological field methods that they are learning about is yet another goal that I have in anthropology. In ethnographic field research, the body is privileged as a site of knowledge and experience; just as in performance knowledge is embodied and communicated to others. Similarly, by carrying out small projects such as writing a short oral history of an elderly relative or local community member, observing gender dynamics in a dormitory dining hall, or acting as a participant observer in on campus events such as a sorority rush, students can embody and better understand the methods that anthropologists use in their research. Moreover, in smaller upper level classes, the inclusion of a student performance as well as written report, as a way of presenting their project results to the rest of the class, can also serve as a very inspiring and engaging assessment tool.

**Transformation:** Like recent trends in postmodern ethnography, performances are often reflexive, or self aware, just as effective student learning can be. Thus, one of my goals in teaching anthropology is to be the catalyst for transformation. By exposing students to other cultures, but also by analyzing the mainstream culture in the United States, I hope that students will begin to challenge themselves and their preconceptions about others, as well as reflect on and gain insights into their own cultures. In the classroom, this can be accomplished by assigning some readings that examine mainstream American (and especially college) culture from the point of view of an anthropologist and/or foreigner. Short readings such as *The Nacirema* and longer ethnographies such as Michael Moffatt's *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (1989) might be useful in this endeavor.

In teaching overall, I aim to create an inclusive environment for students of different backgrounds and learning styles. My own personal experience as a student of color in a majority white high school and later at an Ivy League university has proven to me that diversity in the student body and faculty, as well as in the approaches and points of view of course content, is necessary to a well-rounded learning experience for all of the students. This has impacted my own approach to having a more inclusive method of teaching that integrates these often marginalized points of view, even if students from those particular groups are not represented in the classroom. Moreover, my presence as a professor within a field in which minority women are severely underrepresented will encourage diversity and inspire similar aspirations for students of all backgrounds. An example of the importance of this representation can be seen in the comments of an African-American student for whom I was a graduate student instructor for an introductory level course. She approached me after class one day and told me that I was the first African-American instructor that she'd had at the university, and she was a junior. The fact that she explicitly sought me out to tell me this implies to me that she saw my presence as significant and meaningful in the academic setting.

Students also have different learning styles, and I seek to accommodate these various ways of learning by using different pedagogical tools in the same classroom. These include lecturing, discussions, audio-visual materials, with even more active learning encouraged through mini ethnographic projects, small group work, and group presentations, among others.

In summary, student learning can be a communicative, embodied, and transformative process, like performance. In teaching anthropology, I aim to create an exciting and challenging learning environment in which students can come to know not only others, but also themselves better by, metaphorically, “entering one another’s performances.”