

American Culture

Teaching Philosophy Second Draft

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

A couple years ago, while I was an instructor in an introductory-level American Culture course, I had an experience that taught me how to measure my success as a teacher. That term, the college newspaper reported on a race-based hate crime that had taken place in an undergraduate neighborhood. Campus organizations responded with a full day of programming, and I offered extra credit to students who attended and then wrote a response paper, presented to the class, or met with me in office hours to discuss their experience. In one such meeting, a white student, who had grown up in a mostly-white suburb of Chicago, claimed to have been unaffected by racism. When I related what he said to the course lectures for that week and pointed out to him that his community was racially homogenous because of racism and “white flight,” I watched a change happen in him. “Why didn’t I know about this before,” he asked me, “What is anyone doing about it?”

That interaction represented a convergence of all the elements of my philosophy on teaching and learning. Relating course material to current events and students’ experiences allowed that student to apply what we were learning to better understand both the material and his own experience. Encouraging students to seek learning opportunities outside of class was a way to get them to take ownership of their education. Providing various kinds of opportunities for students to process what they had learned at the campus event represented my sensitivity to diverse skill sets and learning styles. And the office hours meeting demonstrated what is at the heart of my teaching philosophy: a focus on nurturing individual relationships and building communities within and outside the classroom.

One of my primary teaching goals is to help students be critical of the world around them in ways that make them want to enact change. To that end, I offer in my courses opportunities for students to learn about current happenings and analyze them using histories and theories they have learned in class. In the introductory-level American Culture course, our examination of the hate crime incident began when I saw the front-page headline in that day’s college newspaper. Immediately, I went to the newspaper office, asked for 50 copies, and designed within the hour a discussion about race, racism, xenophobia, and media reportage for class the same day.

In an upper-level Ethnic Studies course I taught on beauty pageantry this past Spring Term, I posted a real-time feed of pageant news to our course homepage and then asked one student volunteer each day to prepare an article that they would summarize at the beginning of the next day’s class. As a scholar of popular culture, my work requires that I look into the everyday for objects of study that, when read closely, teach us lessons about ourselves. My aim is for students to learn that same skill, and so I make sure to be knowledgeable about current events and flexible about lesson plans, to help students use the vocabulary of the course to talk about what they are experiencing. I am often able to assess that learning when student comments in class or in office hours tie together analytically course materials with past or present events in their lives.

A second goal of my teaching practice is to encourage students to take ownership of their education. In my upper-level beauty pageants course, I began that effort by not including a grading scale on my syllabus. Instead, on the first day of class, I talked to students about how judging systems in pageants outline categories of evaluation and measures used to evaluate contestants, and that both of those things represented the values inherent to the pageant itself. Likewise, I told them, we as a classroom community would brainstorm categories of evaluation in the course—like participation, reading assignments, writing assignments—and then develop a system to measure student performance that reflected my values as a teacher and their values as a class. Students took on the activity with enthusiasm and produced models of an “A” student, a “B” student, and so on that I took away and revised into a grading rubric in which students could feel invested because they had helped to create it.

In both upper- and lower-level courses, one of my most successful ways of teaching students to take charge of their learning and others’ is an assignment I call co-facilitation, wherein I empower students to teach one

another. Halfway through the term, after I have spent weeks modeling various kinds of lectures, discussions, and in-class activities, I give students the opportunity to volunteer to facilitate a class session or portion thereof with me. In a co-facilitation assignment, a pair of students completes assigned readings for the week early, so that they can meet with me in office hours the day before a class and develop a lesson plan. Once we get to class, the co-facilitators execute the lesson plan, sometimes so skillfully that I am able to act as just another student in the class. The co-facilitation assignment draws upon various learning skills. Students work in groups to process a reading assignment, distill the most important points from it, and determine how best to present it so that their peers can learn. As a result, co-facilitation comes with a sort of built-in system of assessment: I can tell how well student facilitators have learned the material by how clearly they teach it. In course evaluations, students who co-facilitated consistently say they learned the most from that opportunity to teach, and students who did not take advantage of that opportunity consistently lament the fact that I offered co-facilitation on a volunteer basis. They wish I had made everyone do it.

My third major teaching goal is to be sensitive to diverse skill sets and learning styles. One of the reasons I began the co-facilitation assignment is that I learned, from seminars about pedagogy, that instructors often teach to their own learning styles. Recognizing the limits of my learning style as an individual, I created co-facilitation as a way to get a number of different people with diverse backgrounds all teaching to their own learning styles as well. I also solicit periodic feedback from students, asking them at the beginning, middle, and end of a term to reflect on how they learn best. As an instructor in the humanities, I find that paper assignments of varying lengths are the most effective way for students to analyze what they have read in conversation with what they have learned in the classroom. I usually assign at least two papers per term, so that students can process and utilize my feedback. Their performance on the subsequent paper gives me a sense of what they have learned about both academic argumentation and writing.

In addition to written assignments, participation is always a key element of my teaching in both upper- and lower-level courses. Course evaluations have shown time and again that students appreciate that full-group discussions and small-group activities in my classes are lively, engaged, honest, and safe—as students feel comfortable expressing dissent without being disrespectful or feeling disrespected. In college, I was an active classroom participator, and so I have had to learn in conversation with more reticent students what the barriers are to their vocal participation in class. To be sensitive to barriers of shyness, inexperience, intimidation, and trouble articulating thoughts into words on the spot, I offer a number of ways for students to participate: as presenters of current events material prepared in advance, as discussants in class, as facilitators of class sessions, and as respondents to questions posed to the class email listserve. In addition, I use writing as a discussion tool, often giving students between two and five minutes before a discussion begins to write a response to a discussion question, so that they can base their spoken comments to the rest of the class on something they have already articulated in writing.

Most importantly, students who enter my classes know from the first day that office hours are an important learning and participation opportunity. For me, office hours fulfill, in some way, all of my teaching goals. Most directly, though, office hours appointments allow me to build a classroom community out of a number of individual relationships. I require that all students meet with me at least once at the beginning of the term, and I require further that any student who misses a class come into my office to discuss with me the readings relevant to the day of their absence. Office hours conversations give me an opportunity to assess how well an individual student is learning through one-on-one interaction. Those interactions also have positive ramifications in the classroom, as I consistently receive evaluations saying that students feel respected in the classroom, are comfortable speaking their minds, and know I am there as an ally. By forming relationships, I form community; and by forming community, I form engaged students who continue to be learners even after they leave the classroom. At the most successful of those moments, students ask not only what anyone is doing to change things but, more importantly, how they themselves can be the ones to enact that change.