

Teaching Philosophy:

Inspiring joy in learning through student-centered approaches

Education is a process, not a product. It may nonetheless have end results—empowerment, knowledge, curiosity, certain measurable outcomes—but these are not simply items purchased with tuition dollars; they emerge from a process of learning. The shift to student-centered learning rewrites the dusty roles of professor as information provider and student as passive consumer. But student-centered methods are only valuable if they’re enjoyable to the students; they should not burden students with onerous duty, but rather inspire students to take active leadership. By demonstrating the joy of academic inquiry and making assignments not just pedagogically sound but also *fun*, my students come to realize that scholarship isn’t drudgery, but a delight worth pursuing.

Course evaluations frequently refer to my classes as “fun”—but also indicate that students “learned more than in most classes.” My literature survey students laughed *and* learned the day they wrote satires of 18th century advice poems; they’ve practiced close reading and reviewed for exams in an extra credit assignment to justify their choice of a pop song that could be the “theme song” of any assigned text. These assignments not only produced knowledge, but they did so in a way that cultivated curiosity, activated students’ love of learning, and trusted their own ability to make knowledgeable, insightful claims about the material of study. It’s vital that these kind of “fun” assignments aren’t merely for amusement, but actually involve skills of academic inquiry and engage in the content and practices of the field; my “midterm review playlist” assignment got students thinking about the content and characters of the texts we’ve read, encouraged them to practice close reading in a low-stakes environment before the major midterm essay, and fulfilled the course objective of making connections between texts and concepts across literary history. When students realize that “fun” can be scholarly, they begin to pursue learning from a place of curiosity and joy, which not only makes them better scholars, it makes them more likely to pursue their passion for learning beyond my classroom.

My role as a teacher is to constructively make room for students to take leadership. In all my in-person classes I include collaborative group work, letting students define their own roles within the group, whether that be writing, or speaking, or keeping others on task. In my content-focused literature survey courses, students write prompts and lead in-class discussions, and “crowdsource” the content of the midterm and final exams, expanding small group work into a collaboration with the entire class. In addition to this collaborative co-teaching, I encourage students to take personal leadership of their own coursework. My students feel invested in my composition courses because I teach real-world genres of writing: business memos, project proposals, professional letters, even blog posts; I recognize that composition isn’t limited to the written page, and encourage students to explore multimedia production and digital document design. Curricula and materials I developed for first-year writing courses have been published in multiple editions of our methods textbook and shared as recommended instructor resources since 2012; I’ve also been invited to speak to new instructors in the Writing Program to share my innovative rhetoric and research assignment sequence. By giving students more autonomy and restructuring the public argument and presentation assignments to multimodal explorations of students’ individual interests, I transformed a challenging (and often boring) sequence of assignments into a student-led process of academic inquiry and active engagement with issues relevant to students’ lives in and beyond the classroom.

As a queer woman, domestic violence survivor, and first-generation college student who experienced poverty both in childhood and adult life, I recognize how rarely my students have someone with my perspective and experience teaching their courses. Without centering my own perspective or politics, I nonetheless serve as a mentor for younger students in their first encounters with higher education, particularly understanding those whose families have limited or no experience with academia. As much as my personal example contributes to the diversity of the academy, my position as instructor shouldn’t overshadow that of my students; in my student-centered approach to education, I am a co-collaborator with my students, letting my individuality

become a constituent part of the diversity of the classroom as a whole. I deploy my privilege and power as an instructor to amplify my students' voices and experiences and to advocate for their success.

I also strive to ensure that texts assigned in my literature courses reflect the true diversity of history and expand the canon to recognize those voices previously marginalized. This is more difficult—but even more vital—in required survey courses like the one I teach. I carefully balance expansions of the canon—highlighting women's voices, authors of color, writings of the enslaved or colonized, and “uncloseting” queer canonical authors—with the comprehensive coverage of eras, movements, and genres required by learning objectives and standardized tests. Diversity on the syllabus, however, cannot just be limited to the reading list; my teaching also accounts for the diversity of students encountering this material.

One of the greatest challenges in college teaching is adapting to the broad diversity of life experiences students bring with them. A single class of 25 students may include students from elite college-prep schools; students from underfunded public schools; homeschooled students; veterans returning to college after time deployed and years after leaving high school; single parents and students working multiple jobs; and students for whom English is not their first language, including international students and immigrants, documented or otherwise. Often, students' pre-college experiences have been far from student-centered; students coming from a testing-focused, top-down learning experience sometimes struggle to adapt to an environment where they have agency. Showing students that their viewpoints are valuable and giving them permission to follow their own curiosity opens up to them a new relationship to learning. I encourage my students to see their diverse backgrounds as valuable accumulations of insight and skills that could only come from lived experience. For example, a student from Singapore found he was exceptionally adept at discussing and analyzing film, and combined this with his personal experience of compulsory military service to analyze the visual rhetoric of the movie *American Sniper* in juxtaposition with Tim O'Brien's “How to Tell a True War Story”; as an older student with strong time-management skills, he teamed up with a small peer workshopping group who could share their skills as native speakers while they learned from his organization and discipline. Together, that workshopping group produced some of the strongest work in the course over the semester, and did so by embracing their diverse skillsets and learning from one another.

Greater accessibility of course content gives me flexibility to work with each student individually, helping them identify their own strengths and weaknesses and collaboratively crafting adaptive approaches to assignments that can build into a skillset for success in the rest of their courses. The idea of *equality* in the classroom may assume treating students as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass; but *equity* is founded upon equal attention to each student as an *individual*. I take the time to forge individual partnerships with each student—even in large classes—which foster student success in three important ways: first, by making myself approachable as an instructor, mentor, or colleague, students are more likely to be open with me about their individual needs; next, a more personal, collegiate atmosphere in the classroom makes course material more relatable and accessible; finally, by treating each student as an individual, students learn to embrace their uniqueness, and feel empowered to take agency in directing their own course of study.

I am passionate not only about the material I teach, but also about inspiring my students to be just as excited about studying literature. In my Summer 2016 literature survey course, 93.34% answered “strongly agree” or “agree” to “the instructor inspires interest in the subject area of this course.” A student in one of my online survey courses commented, “She is really passionate about what she is teaching and it really comes across that way and makes me excited about the material. Her lectures were enjoyable to listen to and really informative!!” My teaching effectiveness is consistently highly-rated, but I consider inspiring student interest more important than any other evaluation metric. My mission as a teacher is not to merely dispense knowledge, but rather to spark students' curiosity and give them agency to embark on their own scholarly journeys. The most powerful thing I do as a teacher is encouraging students to trust their own wisdom, value their unique perspectives, and speak their minds. My role as an instructor is to step up to empower students—with agency, knowledge, skills—and then to step back to let them find their own way to becoming fellow scholars.