

Teaching Philosophy

A core component of my teaching is the recognition that each student comes to my classroom with beliefs, interests, and experiences that set them apart from their classmates. As an instructor, I remain aware that each student will have a unique relationship to course materials. It is only through exploring these differences that we can have productive and illuminating conversations about literature. It's essential that students make personal connections to the texts we read, that they don't simply read the words on the page and forget them by the end of the semester. My lesson plans are often designed to help students have a more immersive relationship to course materials. For example, when we discuss characterization in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students are put into small groups and asked to perform a tableau of an important passage from the novel in front of the class; that is, they recreate a scene and freeze in place, making sure that their body language and facial expressions convey the feelings of the character in that moment. In the conversations that follow, students explain their choices and recognize how embodying that character has forced them to think deeply about the character's feelings and motivations. When I read Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* with my students at the University of Iowa, I brought them to the university's Center for Computer-Aided Design, where my students put on virtual reality headgear that allowed them to see a recreation of the garret space Jacobs occupied for seven years. When students read about her experience, they expressed mild disbelief that she spent so long in the space; when they physically saw the space through the VR headset, they were visibly shocked and often remarked that they could never live in such conditions. These reactions indicated how they were making connections between their own lives and the text, an important step in helping them recognize the value of reading.

I design writing assignments to not only have students think deeply about course texts, but to also consider how our course themes resonate with their own experiences. I typically do this by assigning creative work for one of my major writing assignments. For example, after reading Audre Lorde's automythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, I ask students to compose their own automythographies, in which they consider how their unique identities have shaped how they experience the world. In the rationales that accompany their work, students showcase how the assignment helped them better understand the course objectives and more deeply engage with Lorde's text.

Another key component of my teaching is trust. This applies to my trust in students—that they are dedicating all the time and energy they can to our course, that their reasons for missing class or needing extensions are valid, that they challenge peers from a place of genuine inquiry—and in a peer-to-peer context, given the centrality of discussion in my classroom. Collaboration and community-building are pillars of my pedagogy. Twice a semester I meet with each student in office hours to discuss major writing assignments. During these conferences, I make time to also discuss their experience in our class and, should they be willing, their semester overall. These conferences are productive in multiple ways; since incorporating them, my students perform better on their written assignments and participate more often in class. Through question roll call, conferences, and a relaxed and congenial atmosphere in the classroom, my students are active, engaged participants, willing to express themselves and able to connect their own experiences with the course materials. At least one per week, I have students work in groups and I regularly assign major projects in teams. While many college students dread groupwork, my students always approach this work with excitement, since they know their peers well and understand that our classroom culture means that each student will be held accountable for contributing to the project.

A major joy—and challenge—of teaching is starting each semester with a new group of students who will respond differently to course materials. With my style of teaching, I try to ensure that each student, each semester will both read and compose texts that resonate with them beyond their time in my class. My commitment to equity also demands that I devote time and resources to helping each individual student based on their needs, a challenge I meet via my ungrading and conferencing system. While over the course of my career I may have hundreds of students come through my classroom, students will have only one experience of my class. It's my responsibility to make that experience worthwhile and meaningful, and to remember that each student arrives with a unique background and set of values that enrich our class experience.