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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

For me, teaching is a rhetorical endeavor. It involves the close, careful analysis of texts in light of a consideration of audience, persuasive purpose, and historical context as well as an emphasis on writing as a recursive and process-based activity. Exposing students to a diversity of readings, technologies, assignments, and writing strategies, I try to show that there is not just one, “right,” answer when it comes to learning methods or rhetorical tasks. My goal is to create a dynamic classroom community that fosters collaborative learning, sophisticated thinking about complicated topics, an openness to new ideas, and a willingness to argue with integrity. Over the past six years, I have taught a broad spectrum of classes ranging from freshman composition to graduate courses in pedagogy and rhetorical theory, writing courses designed to fulfill university requirements (about digital rhetoric, representations of the Israel/Palestine conflict, and food) as well as literature courses designed to introduce students to the English major. Though my courses vary in structure and emphasis, depending on curricular constraints and students’ needs, what remains constant throughout is my rhetorical approach to teaching critical thinking, reading, and writing.

Rhetorical concepts helped us discuss and better understand an “unsolvable” political problem replete with controversy in “Unfulfilled Promises in the Promised Land: The Rhetoric of Peace in the Middle East.” Our class goals were not to solve “the” problem—would that our class *could* create “Peace in the Middle East,” —but to increase our comprehension of the topic’s complexity and figure out how to use our newly acquired understanding to make progress toward solving related problems in local, more familiar, contexts. For example, students’ final assignment asked them to create “civil discourse” in the local community. After observing meetings of relevant student organizations, students collaborated both to discern the points of disagreement among the groups and then to invent strategies for fostering dialogue among them. Final projects included campus events and community websites.

Such assignments also show how I aim to help students become better writers. I want them to succeed not just in my course, but also in the many writing situations they will face throughout their lives—within and outside of academe. I discuss writing as process-based and use the canons of rhetoric—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery—to explain the steps. Talking about writing in terms of drafts, a process of discovery, “arguments waiting to happen,” and recursive revisions helps students do a better job of separating their identity as individuals from their performance on time-bound tasks. Some students who never thought of themselves as “good writers” suddenly think they are capable of becoming just that.

In all the courses I teach, writing and literature, I strive to develop an atmosphere of intellectual collaboration and collegiality. These elements build the trust necessary to take on the challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable, issues of race, gender, genre, politics, and identity that my courses present. To realize these goals, I refer to my students by name, and require them to do the same while building upon the contributions from students who preceded them in conversation. In so doing, I ensure that class discussions are not simply lively but engaged—ones in which students carefully listen to, challenge, and argue with one another. My use of technology extends this community beyond the classroom walls and expands the kinds of learning valued within them. Using blogs (web-logs) and wikis allows discussions to begin before and continue after class meets. Students’ reactions, questions, or insights posted online become building blocks for in-class interactions. Integrating students’ input into class activities fosters a sense of shared investment in and excitement about the course while also enabling the content to adapt to its audience’s most salient needs and interests. Assigning students to compose both individually and collaboratively, in traditional print and video, challenges them to consider which of the many media available are most appropriate to the rhetorical task.

Developing an intellectual community requires an instructor to be approachable, challenging, and inspiring. Through my teaching, I encourage students to try multiple methods, experiment with new ideas, and develop confidence in their abilities. The rhetorical method I employ is flexible enough to be used in any class. In Kenneth Burke’s words, it requires students to be “quizzical,” and, “provides the surest ground for the discernment and appreciation of linguistic resources,” thus enabling them to be inventive, to take risks, and to argue civilly in class and the world.