

Teaching Statement

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"Okay, folks. What do we think?"

I'd have to say I start most of my literature classes with the same question. Often, especially in the beginning, it's met with poised and suspicious silence. Students, it seems to me, have been educated to say what they know, and to keep silent about what they don't know. A teacher asking them what they really think often seems a little strange to them.

"It was confusing. I don't know where he was going with it, what he was trying to do," said Matt, about a long poem assigned for class that day.

"Say more. What confused you?"

I've come to accept that learning, as a subject, is too complex to be easily contained in one, or even several, disciplines. I'd like to say that I know it when I see it, but even that's uncertain. Objective tests and problems can't evaluate intellectual complexity very well, and other types of assessments, those that might ask students to conceptualize more deeply, don't necessarily generate results that are clearly measurable. For myself as a teacher, the problem is that most learning happens inside the learner, beyond a teacher's easy reach. Even more humbling are the individual differences among learners; for reasons too numerous to list, what one student finds interesting or easy, another finds frustrating or pointless. But even if learning is by no means certain, I think it can be facilitated. If I, as a teacher, create challenging exercises and assignments, if I reinforce and model appropriate "problem solving" activities, and if I try to build bridges between my course and other learning experiences, I can create a context for critical thinking and intellectual growth. By beginning the class with questions and confusions, the discussion is immediately grounded in what students have to say about the material, and by showing them that their questions have intellectual value, I can encourage students to take their own thinking and learning seriously.

Every semester, even if I'm teaching the same course, I shuffle readings, re-work writing prompts, and I always ask students to participate in revising and re-directing course components and assignments as the course proceeds, especially if I'm experimenting with a new format or text. But at the core of this flexibility is a consistent commitment to several ideals: that to be a student is basically to read and write, think and discuss, and that these activities are profoundly significant, and can be, in fact, life-altering. Since questions of meaning and meaningfulness ask us to take up and examine our most profound concerns and deepest values, I can't, except in the most superficial ways, teach students what a story or line of poetry means. But I can encourage them to be active and engaged learners, and lend significance and legitimacy to their questions and responses. I consistently shift my students' attention to the contexts and assumptions of their learning, and I want them to feel like they are accomplishing something tangible and important. And if the class does coalesce into an intellectual community, if more and more, students are so engaged in discussion they can't stop talking at the end of the hour and instead, spill out into the halls, or even better, continue the discussion in their dorm rooms or over coffee, then I think I've done something right. I want my students, I suppose, to recognize and remember a class that made them think.

As Matt struggles to articulate the parameters of his confusion, I take notes on the board, writing down phrases from his response. I use all three blackboards: questions about the same kinds of things are put next to each other, questions that are seemingly unrelated are written on opposite sides of the board. As Matt's confusion begins to take a shape, other students contribute. Some second Matt's complaint. Some have answers or responses, or want to introduce related questions or concerns, and these are added to the board in appropriate places. Sometimes before I write something on the board, I ask students to clarify, or paraphrase themselves. Often, I challenge them. Frequently, I interrupt the flow to make summarizing statements or conduct impromptu opinion polls. I call on students if they look puzzled, or if a classmate's comment relates to something they've said previously, or if they haven't said anything in a while. Some comments lurk at the edges, or are erased and overwritten by other comments. I draw arrows and circles and other shapes as I attempt to rough out, with their feedback, a general sketch of the shape of the class' thinking. The chalkboard is messy: scribbles and erasures trace the generative complexity of reading critically. Class discussions develop and mature, and our understandings, rather than closing or concluding, deepen.

Literature has very few neat or simple answers, and its meanings change as we do. For coherence, I most often organize my syllabi around a set of common themes or problems that connect the readings to each other and to the writing assignments. This gives the class a chance to consider, then reconsider, questions they've asked in previous discussions. For instance, in Science Fiction, after reading several novels about runaway technological development and scientific hubris, I ask the students to write a story that expresses a specific aspect of their own thinking about the theme, and we share these in class. As the final writing assignment for my poetics class last semester, I asked them to use two or three of their own poems, or the poems of a classmate, as illustrations in an extended discussion of their own poetics. In my short story class, I asked students first to imitate a writer whose story we had studied, and then exchange their work and write a critical comparison between their classmate's imitation and the original. By asking them to consider their own writing in conversation with the other course readings, I invite them to see themselves and their classmates as intellectual participants and agents. My students have told me these kinds of assignments have been transformative; they often remember the excitement of writing them years later.

I'd identify my pedagogy as student-centered; for me, the whole point is what they learn, not what I know. I'd also be comfortable identifying myself as a constructivist, since I'm deeply committed to the meanings the students make for themselves. I'm most often socratic in my discussion practices; I value and encourage the orderly and reflective dialogue between interested and attentive intellects. I am passionate about English studies, and I bring my excitement and my sense of urgency about the importance of reading and writing to my students. And I respect my students, both intellectually and personally; they have taught me everything I know about teaching.

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