

I recently marked my 20-year anniversary of university teaching and I have found that rather than getting more fixed, my teaching practice continues to grow and change. I have found that as I become more competent and confident, I can risk more. I have also found that I am a tinkerer. I am never satisfied to teach the same class I taught the semester or year before. I want to make it better – I want to update it, to challenge the students more, to find more moments where we can revisit important ideas, and invite the students to find ownership in the skills and ideas offered in the course. At the same time, I have noted that there are abiding values of respect and inclusiveness that have always guided my work.

My philosophy challenges me to meet my students where they are, and this has led me to develop a deeply inclusive pedagogical practice where all students can share their opinions about difficult topics. I understand my role as an ally is to not only support minority voices, but also to use my personal intersectionality to help majority students to understand the point(s) of view presented in texts that present them with traditionally marginalized voices while avoiding disrespect towards the majoritarian students' ideological or religious positions. For our theatre appreciation class, I have developed (in cooperation with graduate assistants) a daily writing exercise that allows students to privately process their relationship to the issues and identities at hand. This feedback loop is vital to my ability to shape the discussion and analysis so that all the points of view can be explored without students being “called out” for their differing ideas.

At its core, my instructional philosophy is founded on a deep respect for all students and the sacrifices they make to pursue their education and how difficult it can be to face artistic and scholarly challenges. In order to remain mindful of the rigors our students face, I have continued my own training in the performing arts. This continual embodied training and my own ongoing curiosity, has led me to frequently examine my own learning processes while simultaneously engaging students in their own learning processes. In this way, I have become an instructor who encourages students to find out how they themselves learn. I believe that students who have figured out their own method for acquiring skills and knowledge will ultimately be more successful both in school and in life. With this belief, I build assignments that connect content and technique to self-reflection and, hopefully, self-discovery.

Because of lessons I have learned about practicality in instruction, I have adopted an approach to classes with objectives based on analytical skill and knowledge acquisition; I seek out ways to concretize seemingly abstract facts and ideas. For example, in theatre classes in history, criticism and theory, I focus on the questions and problems demanded by theatrical production to illustrate the concrete results of critical and historical analysis. When we explore dramatic structure in introductory theatre classes, I have the students discuss how their differing responses to plot analysis questions would result in differing productions. By dreaming up multiple answers to the same plot problem, students bring their creativity to bear on analytical problems – a fundamental practice in theatre. This approach transfers to skills-based classes as well because successful artists need to try a multitude of approaches, and different plays, directors or situations may demand a different set of skills. If a student leaves college with a “well-stocked toolbox,” they will rise to challenges demanded by diverse situations.

Ultimately, the day-to-day process of teaching is endlessly fascinating because a job well done means that students are growing as people and artists. For me, the paradox of teaching is that I can never be sure what students will take away from our time together and that keeps me honest about my role as an instructor. Students will always make their own choices about their lives and their learning, but it is my hope that through my core principles I can engage them in owning their growth as artists and scholars.