

Statement of Teaching Innovation – Cat Gleason

I am a tinkerer. Thus, innovation in my classes often takes the form of a tweak here and there. However, there are times when I dive into a course and build it from the ground up or overhaul an old standby.

Early in my teaching career, I designed a class in physical theatre before I actually knew what physical theatre was. I knew I wanted to direct The Open Theatre's *Serpent* and I knew I would need an ensemble cast who could create collaboratively through abstract vocal and physical expression. I threw myself into research about this sort of theatre and enrolled in classes with Chicago companies who looked like they could teach me what I needed to know. My mentors at Southern Illinois University trusted me enough to create an advanced movement class where students learned movement-based acting techniques. This class was conducted in 1998. Ten years later when American theatre departments were looking to find ways to teach their students the skills they needed for the growing number of plays that fall under the rubric of "physical theatre" and "devised theatre," SIU revived the class I created and one of my former students taught it.

One of my current passions in teaching theatre is trying to find ways to teach skills in collaboration. recently, after years of professional and academic practice in dramaturgy as well as mentoring young dramaturgs in my home institution and at the Region 5, KCACTF Festival, my first opportunity to teach Introduction to Dramaturgy occurred. For this class, I conceived of the role of the dramaturg as an expert in collaboration. Our first work in this area was to create a model of what good collaboration looks like. We worked as a group to create a rubric by which we would measure our work throughout the semester. We were able to put our work to the test on a new play development project. We paired dramaturgs with playwrights from an intermediate playwrighting course to work on 10-minute plays. They met with the playwrights at least once and then facilitated the talkbacks at the public readings at the Missouri Playwrights Workshop (the first time that this particular new play workshop had ever used dramaturgs). When the dramaturgs reflected on their working relationships with their playwrights they used our collaboration rubric and it was remarkable to see how their expectations about their abilities and relationships were shaped by the rubric.

Innovation also took the form of a major overhaul of an existing course. The opportunity to co-lecture with one of our graduate assistants occurred after three semesters of teaching a large enrollment entry-level theatre course together. In the process of considering how we might co-teach the class, we completely restructured the evaluation of student learning. In the past, the twice weekly large lectures were evaluated with two high-consequence exams over reading and lecture material. Recent literature on pedagogical practice is unanimous regarding the lack of effectiveness in this sort of approach, so we eliminated the exams in favor of online reading quizzes to assess reading completion and comprehension. We then wrestled with how to assess learning in the lectures. In previous semesters lecture attendance dwindled as the semester progressed and students tested poorly on the lecture material. We came up with a low-tech solution. Students are asked for a hand-written response to 2-3 questions derived from each lecture. Questions drew on recall of factual material but also asked them to apply a concept learned to their own life or the lives of the characters they had been reading about. Lecture attendance changed dramatically as a result of this practice. By eliminating the midterm and final exams, we freed up valuable class time to be used for other learning activities. We took a large risk and instituted a full-class devising project focused on identity and social justice using the *Laramie Project* (a course reading) as a model for collaboration. The first semester I instituted this activity it resulted in a remarkable performance that responded to the events of the fall of 2015 on the University of Missouri campus. All of us involved in that particular semester's work reflected that we had had a rare opportunity to respond with art to major events happening around us.

Because of recent events on the MU campus, I have been challenged as an instructor, mentor and colleague to create a pedagogical practice that more closely aligns with my moral and political philosophy. Over the last couple of years, I have reflected deeply upon national and local issues that resonated in the classrooms I inhabit with my students and teaching assistants. In the fall of 2015 I was stunned by the images of a student being thrown to the ground by a police officer, at that point, I forced myself to consider what sort of behavior I was insisting upon in the lecture hall and just what I was willing to do to enforce it. Since then, I have worked with the teaching team for my large lecture class to develop ideas about how we can encourage enlivened participation while minimizing disruption. This is an ongoing experiment, but we are all certain that we do not want to “police” our students anymore. More recently I have found myself working with actors who were struggling with questions of personal autonomy in the face of an industry that is going through a profound shift in respect to personal relationships and power. In movement classes when my TA and I talk about staged intimacy, we make sure our students know that there are people who will support them in saying, “No.” And I hope I can help create a theatre industry that is safe for future generations of students.

Our campus community at the University of Missouri has been challenged to be more inclusive and while I have always insisted on a curriculum that presented plays by and about traditionally marginalized voices, I have had to consider more carefully how I can continue to engage in these texts and the issues they present while meeting my majoritarian students where they live and not assume they all hold the same world view as the play. I understand my role as an ally is to not only support minority voices but to also use my personal intersectionality to help majority students to understand the point of view presented in these texts without disrespecting any of the students ideological or religious positions. I am currently working on a syllabus for Introduction to Dramaturgy that will be designated as a Diversity Intensive class. While I will be assigning readings that will represent minoritarian voices, I will also include course work that will explore the idea of intersectionality in the role of the dramaturg inquiring about how the work of the dramaturg can be seen as a “helping” role that is most often filled by women and how that role can be affected by its embodiment by a person of color.

Other than the major changes explored above I continually tinker with classes. Changing how students journal about process, developing a number of effective reading response assignments, and using contact improvisation to teach moment-to-moment work in movement for actor’s classes, are just a few of the tweaks I have engaged in recently. Sometimes a new idea does not work; sometimes a new technology fails, but I find that the benefits far outweigh the risks. When a new approach fails, I do risk losing the respect of the students and I am concerned about that. But sometimes when an approach fails, we all learn – indeed, they might learn as much from that failure as I did.