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Teaching Philosophy

We rely on narratives to shape our understanding of our own lives and our culture. Narratives capture how a culture thinks through its constitutive elements—not just historical events but religion, politics, prejudices, desires, ways of understanding history, geography, and science, and so on; in turn, they also produce tangible effects on cultures. My interest in teaching both literature and composition is rooted in my conviction that the ability to understand narratives and how they work is an absolutely crucial skill.

In the classroom, I believe that one of my main responsibilities is to provide my students with greater self-awareness about their reading, writing, and interpretive abilities. In both literature and composition classes, I try to build on skills my students already have and introduce them to new ones while emphasizing the importance of making deliberate choices and understanding why they make those choices, whether the context is developing their interpretation of a text or writing a persuasive argument. I show students how narratives and texts make meaning and shape our conceptions of reality. In doing so, I emphasize how studying literature and improving their writing affects their lives beyond my course. I also make my classroom inclusive by centering students' interests and concerns and by crafting syllabi with a multiplicity of voices. One important function of the humanities classroom is to give students access to perspectives that differ from their own—to help students think more broadly and with greater awareness of their fellow humans' experiences.

I also believe that enjoyment and appreciation are crucial to the humanities classroom. When students feel excited about texts, they are more willing to think about them deeply. I often begin discussions of literary texts with affective and conversational responses; asking for students' favorite passages or how they reacted to particular scenes helps break the ice and ease into group discussion. It is a simple but often effective strategy to begin there and then assist students in moving toward close reading of the language and narrative elements that create particular effects. One student noted their appreciation of how I “made student contributions feel valuable.” For instance, I make lesson plans dynamically, in response to the students I have in front of me. In units that comprise a week or more, I begin by contextualizing the work but also seeking questions and input; I try to use that input to shape what we do throughout the unit.

As an eighteenth-century scholar by training, I try to make reading historical literature more accessible for my students by showing them how texts move through cultures and often have lengthy afterlives. I place works within their original context through lecture and supplemental readings, because I believe it is important to help my students access literary history, but I also frequently use adaptations and other media to get students thinking beyond that context. In my world literature class, we read and discussed the *One Thousand and One Nights* and its legacy. It is easy for students to provide examples from their own experiences, such as Disney's *Aladdin* or the video game *Prince of Persia*, of the tales' long cultural afterlife—though they are surprised to find out that the story of *Aladdin* may not be original to the collection. We then move to discussing how the tales have shaped readers' perceptions about a place many readers have never seen and a culture many of them have never encountered, which is true both in eighteenth-century England and today. Students appreciate this approach: one wrote that I “always challenge the students to make connections with the works we are reading and studying to other works of literature, as well as elements of pop culture. The connections that are forged are really helpful when it comes to understanding the material.” My world literature students

demonstrated their understanding in their final project, in which they wrote their own adaptations of course readings, prefacing the adaptations with explanatory cover letters. A particularly impressive example made use of the structure of the *Nights*, weaving an intricate but compelling narrative of a young girl working as a spy during the American Revolution. This assignment offered a fun break from the usual analytical essays yet still required thoughtful engagement with the assigned texts.

Because my students' lives include many challenges, obligations, and needs, my pedagogy is flexible and adaptable. When teaching writing, I make use of built-in drafting time in the classroom as well as staggered assignments and due dates. Doing so makes projects more manageable and emphasizes that good writing is a process that happens over time. In all my classes, I schedule multiple in-class days focused on argumentation, drafting, and peer workshopping. In my online Introduction to Fiction class, my students composed weekly discussion board posts on quotations from the assigned texts using the PEACH formula (Passage, Explication, Analysis, Connection, and Hook) to help them structure effective analytical paragraphs. While such formulas can be restrictive (and I encourage them to move beyond it if they wish to do so), they also help students build their confidence and gain practice, and composing different, longer writing assignments gives them additional experience.

In my composition classes, I build on students' preexisting knowledge of the rhetorical situation, providing them with the vocabulary and structure to place implicit knowledge/skills into new contexts. I've found that students are already highly adept at adapting their writing to suit their audiences and identifying when others do so. I've developed an introductory activity inspired by Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* in which my students read excerpts of the text and then produce their own brief story in a variety of forms, such as emails to their instructor or social media posts. This always makes for a fun class day, but my students also quickly recognize how they are already attuned to different rhetorical purposes; it shows how often, and in how many everyday situations, we craft narratives about ourselves—as well as how we rely on implicit conceptions of audience, purpose, and context. Reinforcing this point, the major assignments of the semester ask them to write for distinct audiences—not just me or their peers.

Visual media have become crucial to how most of us write, socialize, and engage with the culture around us; images are essential to the narratives we encounter everyday. For that reason, I frequently ask my students to analyze not only different forms of writing but images as well. In my literature classes, I plan thematic units, such as one on East Asian Drama in my world literature class, in which we watched videos of contemporary productions of early modern theatrical works. I also build in visual analysis assignments, such as one in which my students considered different illustrations, spanning from the nineteenth century to the present, of tales from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. In my composition classes, my students analyze commercials and infomercials; writing their own in small groups makes for a fun class day but also excellent practice in analyzing audience, context, and purpose. Providing my students with examples from different media emphasizes how these skills lead to more thoughtful engagement with cultural artifacts in their everyday lives and are transferrable to other classes.

When students gain self-awareness about their choices in reading, writing, and analysis, they become better prepared to analyze the texts and images that they constantly encounter in my classroom and beyond it. Students already engage with all kinds of writing—and narratives—in vastly different contexts and are well-equipped to analyze them. But this is exactly why I believe it's more important than ever for students to learn how to articulate these skills to themselves and make more meaningful choices when they practice them.