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Teaching Philosophy

Throughout my educational experience, the best teachers I have encountered have been those who introduced me to a new lens of thought. They offered me content too, in subjects ranging from American Literature to Philosophy to Biology, but what differentiated their courses from my usual academic experiences, what gave them a lasting impact in my development as a student and as a human being, was the invitation to inquiry. These teachers pushed me to ask questions about the content, to learn new academic conversations and modes of discourse without taking their findings at face value. In response to these challenges, I developed new habits of thought. I acquired new lenses through which to see the world, lenses that I would deploy long after I left the classroom. On a fundamental level, these teachers are responsible for the bric-a-brac of my consciousness. I think how I think because of their classes. Their instruction acted like an accelerant to flames, spurring a more rapid evolution of my thought process.

Those results are likely too idealistic to expect now that I am teaching students of my own, but those positive student experiences have been instrumental in how I have developed my philosophy of teaching. While any course will have its objective content, my priority will always be directed toward convey the underlying systems of thought that underlie that content. My focus will be less upon the linear acquisition of discrete facts and more on the organic development of cognition. Less emphasis upon recall assessments and more emphasis on open-ended reflection and inquiry-based assignments. This prioritization may create some challenges by removing the

more objective measurements of student progress, but those challenges are well worth the potential reward of a lasting, holistic student outcome.

In order to facilitate those lasting outcomes, I typically use a flipped classroom design to introduce most course material. Students will be expected to have completed and annotated the relevant readings for the week as homework, while the in-class experience will be comprised primarily of discussion and group activities. Those readings will include the texts associated with the discipline, but they will also include customized instructional content such as powerpoints (with accompanying audio lectures) and handouts/genre-models. Our classroom time is limited, and, to extract the most value from that resource, I aim to use it to address student questions and give students an outlet for collaborative reflection and inquiry.

I believe that this collaborative approach is critical on multiple levels. From a writing studies perspective, it provides an opportunity for students to actively engage with the social nature of a writing task, to see how their work does not have to be (and in fact can never truly be) the isolated product of a single mind. From a cognitive perspective, collaboration (either in a classroom discussion or small groups) often leads to a more active understanding of course material. Incorporating different perspectives leads to different insights, and these collaborative benefits can allow students to help each other to overcome problem areas, while also reaching a richer understanding of the material as a whole. And from a classroom design perspective, this de-emphasizes the power dynamic of the instructor-as-gatekeeper, privileges students as a source of knowledge rather than only as receptacles.

This dynamic, where students retain a sense of authorship over their own ideas, is essential from both a pedagogical and writings studies perspective. Pedagogically, students are more likely to internalize course content when they approach as active participants in a conversation as opposed to the passive recipients of a lecture. And within the context of writing studies, their sense of authorship will be essential to see their work within a larger rhetorical framework. To communicate meaningfully, you first need to believe that you have something of value to say. Regardless of their audience, students must internalize the sense that their ideas have value, that they have the ability to convey and generate new knowledge in their writing tasks. While it's also important for students to come to an understanding of their work within the contexts of audience and genre, they must be prepared to assume the role of speaker in whatever conversation they choose to join.

The best teachers I can remember changed the way I think, but I usually was not aware of the transformation as it was happening. Their influence was indistinguishable from the natural evolution of my own thought process -- only traceable years after the fact. As I continue to assume the role of instructor, I hope to mimic that process by giving students the tools to better explore their own thoughts, to pursue their own interests, to participate in their own chosen conversations. The course content needs to work in service of the student's cognitive development, not the other way around. Students are not empty vessels. There is already writing on the slate. As a teacher, my goal is to help students acquire the cognitive resources to add more of their own writing to that slate, to think their own thoughts and write to the communities of their choice more critically. I do not want to replace their vision with my own. Instead, I only

want to provide them with a new lens of thought. One which, if they use it, lets them see the world just a little bit differently through their own eyes.