

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Early in the semester I make sure to tell my students that one of the most important tools of the writer and reader is a sense of empathy—the ability to understand the feelings of someone else. I feel that empathy is also a crucial tool for successful teaching. By attempting to understand the whole student, an individual with complex layers of anxiety and hope and apathy and desire, I find that I become a more responsive and responsible teacher, and that my teaching becomes increasingly effective.

Often students come to class with little or no confidence in their abilities as literary citizens. I have taught many students who are the first in their family to go to college. I have taught students who fear reading—who fear books, who fear words—and others who simply dread having to think deliberately and carefully. To get past these emotional impasses I try to plunge the students into writing and reading as quickly as possible, to get them doing things they've never before done in a classroom. I lead them in frequent practice writing exercises designed to engage their critical and imaginative thinking and to break down their resistance to writing. We read other texts aloud. I try to keep the students constantly writing and constantly thinking, constantly trying to see the world from multiple perspectives.

At the same time, I try to encourage the students to trust their own intellectual resources. While, sadly, it seems that few students spend time in deep recreational reading, I have found that most, though their secondary educations and their participation in the popular culture, have enough experience to tell the difference between good writing and bad writing. I work towards getting the students to recognize and apply this experience to their own writing—a difficult task, sometimes, but valuable when students gain insight into the processes of reading, writing, and critical thinking.

I find my teaching to be most effective when it is most transparent, and I work toward transparency in several ways: through a lengthy syllabus workshop on the first class day, through the grading exercise early in the semester, through wide-ranging oral commentaries on and explanations of each assigned writing project, and by detailed written comments on graded papers. I try to make what we're doing in class clear to the students—what they're doing, what I'm doing, and how our actions combine to make a unified whole.

I also make extensive use of student feedback. This aids in my goal of transparency, but does more: by taking seriously the opinions and feelings of the students, I validate them as class participants and share with them a sense of ownership in what we do. Two or three times a semester I seek anonymous written feedback from the students; sometimes the students are harsh in their assessment of the class, sometimes gratifyingly supportive, and very often they offer solid suggestions for improving the class. About every other week I ask students to submit written questions—about the coursework, or about anything—and I have found this to be an outstanding method for generating classroom discussion and for encouraging otherwise

silent students to participate. Then, on the last day of class, I have my current students write out advice for my future students. Their remarks are, on one level, pretty predictable: come to class on time, speak up in discussions, be honest but not cruel in peer review/workshop, go see Dr. White during office hours. On a broader level, however, this exercise encourages students to reflect on they have done for the past 15 or so weeks, and what they have learned.

I tend to disbelieve students who try to dodge responsibility for their writing by claiming that they are not good at English, or that they are not talented writers, for I do not believe that reading and writing are based on “talent,” on mysterious accidents of nature, or on gifts of generous muses. Rather I see reading and writing as skills that can be taught and learned. All my teaching is based on this perspective, a perspective that places the responsibility for success or failure on the individual student. But it is also an extraordinarily liberating perspective, I think, for in a talent-free classroom students can shake off their inhibitions and face what I see as an important truth: that with desire and hard work, anyone can write a competent essay or short story or poem. The skills of reading and writing are there for anybody to use and to learn. Once they are learned—owned, as it were—they become the personal possessions of the learner. I have many times in my life experienced the transformative power of literature. Though this power is not directly transferable from me to the students, I think it is my responsibility as a teacher to help my students achieve transformation, if they want it, to give them the opportunity to learn these skills, to use these tools, to open their lives to literature and to change. Words have power. Words change lives. And I am in the word business.