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What I Mean by Teaching

More than a “career,” teaching is for me a deeply engaging act, a complex investment emotionally and intellectually. Not only has the work with my students been a steady challenge to my pedagogical practice and philosophy; it has also shaped my broader view of life while permeating all areas and levels of my activity. I specialize in critical theory and contemporary American narrative, but I have taught a wide range of courses from theory seminars to American and World Literature surveys, popular culture, composition, and other topics at graduate and undergraduate levels. At Indiana and, since 1998, at UNC-Greensboro, I have offered courses that fulfill writing- and speaking-intensive requirements while introducing students to literary themes, periods, and critical interpretation methods. I have team-taught and have been responsible for small and large classes, and I have participated in curricular development, designing undergraduate and graduate courses alike. Mentoring, tutoring, and supervision of graduate and undergraduate projects—*independent studies, M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations*—have enriched my work and deepened my enthusiasm for it.

My commitment to undergraduate and graduate education rests on a more general principle: the integration of research and teaching. My research enhances my teaching. Conversely, I see teaching as the testing ground of research. Knowledge reveals its value as the researcher becomes teacher and gauges its soundness before students. This stands out among the lessons I have learned from my own teachers, as well as from mentors and colleagues at UNC Greensboro. Thus, since the teaching act has fascinated me continuously, I have striven to better grasp its nature and maintain a self-reflective attitude towards it. This is how teaching itself has become part of my research. To give just one example, the article I have co-authored on critical pedagogy and the emerging generation of college instructors, published a few years ago in the NYU Press collection, *Class Issues: Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and the Public Sphere*, speaks precisely to my efforts to think critically and theoretically about my own classroom experience.

I would describe my teaching philosophy as dialogical, profoundly interactive. I seize the classroom as the site of an exchange among students and between students and their instructor, a conversation ultimately meant to stimulate students’ critical thinking. I challenge them to engage with the situations, structures, hierarchies, and assumptions embedded in the cultural materials we use. In this light, class discussion, participatory lectures, group projects, and collaborative exercises rank among my favorite methods. I urge students both to voice their views and listen to arguments that may question them.

While dealing with controversial issues, my students come to appreciate the positive role diversity of opinion plays in classroom and society at large. For example, in one of my English 303. Critical Approaches to the Study of Literature classes, we had a fairly animated discussion around the politics of representation in The Great Gatsby. Some of us argued that Fitzgerald “excluded” certain social and racial groups from his fictional account of the Jazz Age. Others thought that he “left them out” or “shortchanged” so as to make a point, and that that very absence or marginalization was “telling,” uncovering the complexities of the book and of the author’s own position on such matters. Personally, I chose not to push for a consensus. But I worked with the students to acknowledge the problem the text was posing to us all.

The time spent in UNC Greensboro’s English Department reassured me that discussion in general and discussion groups in particular could be very effective in generating a wide spectrum of opinions on the same issue as well as in making students realize the intellectual and ethical benefits of thoughtful disagreement. I turn to these groups intensively to spur debates throughout the semester. Following some of these debates, I ask the entire class to turn in evaluations of the debate including a brief statement on the possible positive implications of one argument students reject. We then analyze these statements in class, showing how different takes on controversial subjects help us deal with the problems at hand. Narrative viewpoint and cultural prejudice in Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” “Oriental discourse” in David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly, artistic dissent and containment in Don DeLillo’s Mao II have been among the issues whose complexities such a method has helped us clarify. While focusing, for instance, on DeLillo’s novel in a recent English 534 class, The Modern American Novel, I asked students who argued for a complete containment of the artist to reexamine their own position in view of DeLillo’s analysis of Beckett’s “resistant” style. Applying the conclusions of our discussion of this moment in Mao II to the entire novel, the students noticed how the author was setting the stage for a subtle critique of late twentieth-century mechanisms of cultural consumption.

As my teaching evaluations show, I emphasize the role reading and writing skills play in this continuous refinement of critical thinking. My response to students’ writing—whether it is a 30-p. seminar paper or a brief undergraduate essay—is rather developmental than simply evaluative. To ensure the progress of each and every student, I work with them on a one-on-one basis and throughout the whole, step-by-step process, from the initial paper proposal on to several drafts and the final form. Likewise, I have tried to “personalize” my teaching and response to students’ work, fine-tuning the assignments, whenever possible, to individual backgrounds, interests, and profiles. Regardless of the initial quality of my students’ writing, I make sure they understand where they stand and what they must do, in terms of form and substance, to improve this quality. Individual conferences and classroom workshops alike are geared to this goal. Furthermore, while paying special attention to the progress of students’ writing along the semester, I work with them on self-evaluation and self-criticism. It has been argued, teaching begins and ends with the student. But it does not stop in class or in college, or in graduate school for that matter. As far as I am concerned, the student-instructor learning partnership reaches beyond institutions, final exams, and formal relationships. I continue to work with students after they have earned their grades and degrees, helping them prepare their job or graduate school applications or revise their papers for publication. Likewise, as an Associate Editor of symploke, I have encouraged our Ph.D. students to submit book reviews to the journal and, in general, participate actively in the life of our department and profession at large.

Advising, both in the classes I teach and separately, has been one of my most important tools. Further, teaching and mentoring take up different forms in my work with undergraduates and graduates—I should point out that I have chaired or otherwise served on examination and thesis committees for numerous Ph.D.'s and M.A.'s since 1998. This has been a very demanding yet enriching part of my work. With this goal in mind, I include a professional development component in all my graduate classes. This is what one of my English 650 syllabi states: “Graduate students are encouraged to use this course to put their work in the larger, more demanding and competitive perspective of professionalism and academic performance. The class is geared toward graduate reading and writing carrying potential for publication and presentation outside UNCG. While fulfilling the course’s requirements is your main goal, I urge you to take these requirements as an opportunity to think about yourselves as part of the academic community, with its standards, language, methods, tools, and venues. Here are a few questions for us: Where do I stand as a scholar, teacher, critic, and writer, and which are my goals? What is, or will be, my audience? In what kind of scholarly conversation do I wish to intervene based on what I learn in this class? What steps do I have to take to do that? What are the available resources? Which are the outlets for my work? What do I have to do, for instance, to turn my seminar presentation/paper into a conference paper/journal article/dissertation chapter/writing sample?”

To conclude, let me stress that I teach, especially in my undergraduate classes, young men and women how to keep learning after they will have completed their formal education. Besides information, I help them build critical models—models of reading a contemporary novel, a classical movie, a social situation, models of reacting to a fact, to a real-life problem. It is, I think, through the critical absorption and personal use of these models that students make what they learn a part of themselves, discovering not only what is worth knowing but also what deserves loving and caring about. Hence, I was pleased to read in a student evaluation that I have helped him or her “grow as a scholar and even as a person.” Such responses along with my teaching awards, the cards, letters, and e-mails I keep getting from former students are heartening. They tell me that I have been working with them in the right spirit.