

## Statement of Teaching Philosophy (Rev. May 2017)

Because of my training as a rhetorician and writer, I am continually intrigued by writing pedagogy's potential to afford students a flexible relationship with complexity and contingency, whether we understand these terms as referring to shifting rhetorical milieus, the ever-changing constraints and possibilities of students' writing processes, or the spaces students inhabit in their own engagements with the world outside of the classroom. My pedagogy is always dedicated to sharing knowledge and teaching practical skills of literacy and thinking. At the same time, it also involves exploring the dynamics, difficulties, and possibilities of living in a world composed of commonalities and differences; engaging questions of citizenship and social responsibility; and engaging the ways in which the past lives in the present and how it affects who we are and what we can become. Indeed, I believe that at their core, the best humanities courses continually strive to attune students to the fact that the present they now inhabit has a history. It's important to me that my students understand how virtually everything in their individual presents, from the most mundane artifact of popular culture to the most sublime work of high art or literature, can be traced, explored, and ultimately found to be constitutive, in a very real way, of what we are and how we understand ourselves as humans.

Thus, in addition to making sure my students have a firm grasp on content-based knowledge and writing skills, I also provide them with the necessary tools to map an area of inquiry or a critical conversation. Toward these ends, I endeavor to provide them with readings, artifacts, and exercises that (1) provoke intense discussions and responses that resonate with my students' own needs, interests, and experiences; (2) cultivate in them capacities for response, especially in terms of their encounters with others and with challenging texts and artifacts; and (3) expand their awareness of their situatedness in the world, but in such a way that avoids the often individualistic, navel-gazing tendencies of our times. Given the imperative to impart marketable skills, I believe that one of my primary responsibilities as a teacher is instilling in them an appreciation for how they might encounter, analyze, and intervene in the constitutive forces of contemporary institutions, ideas, concepts, and attitudes. Indeed, our present reality, in significant but often harsh ways, is precisely *not* of our students' own making, but it is nevertheless one to which they can become more appropriately, critically, and ethically attuned. This I strive for in all of my courses.

Still, as anyone who has ever taught a first-year writing course (or any course, for that matter) will likely tell you, none of the above is easy. In fact, like most aspects of good teaching, it's challenging. For one thing, the courses we teach are nothing if not "ideas courses," which is to say, they depend for their very success upon not only students' capacities to grasp or even *recall* ideas and concepts, but also to generate their own material, to *invent* ways of "making sense" and composing a variety of texts (whatever the medium). This makes teaching these sorts of classes fun and interesting, of course, but it also places a considerable burden on the instructor to keep lively discussions going, to continually provide students with a sense of relevance (especially when the "pay off" is unclear or not immediately recognizable), and to challenge students to meet or even surpass the projected outcomes of the course. Thus, the

rhetorical tradition's richly-documented emphasis on invention forms a major focus of my teaching philosophy.

Much has been written in recent years on developing pedagogical programs centered on the rhetorical tradition, both in terms of the material to be covered in the course and the conceptual background that informs the course itself. I rely quite heavily on the many pedagogical goals and programs that such research has produced—the rhetorical tradition boasts a rich history of compelling concepts and pedagogical practices. But we must also remember that we must strive to be pragmatic about what I can do in the limited time I have, with the institutional resources I have, and given the milieus in which the majority of my classroom teaching occurs.

In short, in my own teaching, I try to remain intensely aware of the institutional ecologies of possibility and potentiality in which my teaching “happens.”