MY TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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The precept that education must be student-centered meets with nearly unanimous approval today. Student-centered approaches are rooted in the social constructivist belief that we most vividly and sustainably remember from our experiences what makes the greatest impact on us *as an experience.* We remember and integrate best what speaks to our personality, our emotions, and our interests. We retain easily, too, knowledge that we have earned for ourselves by direct, hands-on experience, in lively conversation or joint action with peers, or by individual reflection. By contrast, most of us remember less firmly what we hear in the course of a competent but uninspiring lecture.

Of course, student-centered education requires forethought on the instructor's part. While it's common to suggest that we must meet students where they are, Lev Vygotsky's phrase "zone of proximal development" better describes the ground where instructors can engage most effectively with them. With regard to the depth and extent of their knowledge, the place where students are when they begin a course is not where they should want to stay. Much of what I did as a university instructor aimed to draw students from their current understanding towards broader and deeper insights and to help them learn how to communicate those new insights with confidence. In what follows, I'll provide an overview of the practices that I have found successful in university literature courses and that I would carry into my teaching in community college classrooms. With adaptation, these methods also work well in composition courses, especially if they involve the study of literary works and/or other materials of similar complexity. But I will save that topic for another discussion.

My first practice is to offer relatively brief but engaging talks on the assigned material. As with any lecture, the goal is partly to deliver background information on the work being studied. But it's more important still, I believe, to model a productive conversation between me and the text I am covering, a conversation that draws upon my interpretive abilities and on whatever prior knowledge (cultural, biographical, historical, etc.) I bring to bear. My aim is to demonstrate how an experienced practitioner works towards a compelling interpretation of a text. I invite students to add their own ideas as I proceed—for an experienced instructor, such comments are no distraction. I may discuss with students some of the technical aspects pertaining to how I generate readings (and in general I'm quite open with them about my teaching methods and philosophy), but the aim of this exercise is by no means primarily to showcase technical expertise or adeptness in the various schools of criticism. Most of our students aren't going to become professors, so their future relationship with literature will almost certainly be grounded in a feeling of affection, even of companionableness, for the texts they find worthwhile. In this sense, then, what I am modeling amounts to the ability to develop a genuine *relationship* with texts. Broadly speaking, I am a constructivist: I agree that experiential and social learning is best, so I treat lecture-time mainly as "modeling," a mode I view as compatible with that conviction.

The second practice flows from the first: I build into my class sessions ample time for students to offer brief but substantive presentations (usually three per semester for each student). These presentations are calibrated as responses to detailed, challenging questions that I post to the course website at the beginning of the semester. I encourage students to think independently, but am always willing to work with them to draw out their best ideas and convince them that they can engage with the class in the same manner that I do. I have found this to be an effective way to ensure students' engagement with the texts they study.

The third practice goes well with the presentations requirement I just outlined: students must keep a journal based either on their own questions (in some courses) or on detailed question sets that I provide for the study of each assigned author. This is an opportunity for students to sharpen their skills at registering the impact that a text has on them. To some extent, every good reader harbors a Paterian critic within: "[T]he first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly," as the Oxford don writes in his Preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance.* Only when students have registered their personal response, I suggest, does it make sense to branch out to other varieties of criticism. I like journal work because it's halfway between formal and informal writing: without being anxiety-provoking, it encourages students to think of themselves as serious, thoughtful perceivers and writers. It reinforces the idea, as well, that inspiration is often the reward of persistent effort.

My fourth practice is to assign one or two standard-length papers in response to clear and concise prompts that I will either provide or allow students to generate, and to administer the occasional short-answer quiz. (You're welcome to ask me about the detailed electronic grammar guide I use for marking up and commenting on drafts.) In composition courses, I would increase the number of papers and build in a sense of progress based on the transition from shorter essays to longer ones. It's likely that with the advent of ChatGPT and other AI programs, instructors will need to increase the amount of in-class writing to prevent students from making inappropriate use of these programs. Thus far, however, my experience with ChatGPT does not lead me to fear that it will start composing good college essays right away. The program's results resemble a paper written by a student desperate to avoid close reading. Still, who knows what heights of sophistication AI may reach, given time? Aside from assigning more in-class writing, then, I would collect a first-week writing sample with which to assess each student's present skill level. I would also write prompts that require students to demonstrate the capabilities I find lacking in AI at present.

Fifth, in literature courses, I administer a cumulative final exam of sufficient point-value to be meaningful but not overwhelming. Generally, my exams include passage/author identifications, mix-and-match-style questions, and short essays. A writing course would include a differently calibrated final exam to allow students to demonstrate their proficiency in matters of grammar and syntax we will have discussed during the semester, and to show that they can appreciate crisp, incisive prose when they encounter it as well as produce their own.

In closing, I would like to address two additional key concepts in contemporary education: diversity and differentiation. Diversity is an important factor for many colleges today, as it should be. For my personal story as a community college student, I refer you to my cover letter because it explains my regard for the non-traditional route by which many people come to study at two-year schools. As an educator, I have gone the extra mile to broaden my range with respect to cultures beyond those of the United States and Western Europe: in over one hundred courses, I have taught selected works by more than four hundred authors, a significant number of them from the Far East, the Middle and

Near East, Africa, and Latin America. I have also developed writing courses in African-American literature and history, and have furthered that interest in the American literature courses I've taught.

Diversity is a social good, but it's also a pedagogical good. It requires us as instructors to avoid allowing our practices to slip into "shorthand" mode, wherein we make facile assumptions about what the students collectively know, and we don't even try to get back to the root questions with which everyone should be concerned: what is it we are doing in a literature or writing class, and why are we doing it? What makes a topic, or a particular text, worth our concentration? How should we process what we find troubling about a particular author or text? These are questions that need to be asked, and a diverse classroom demands that we ask and answer them together.

As for differentiation, it makes sense to say—and plenty of research shows—that people learn in a variety of ways, in part because of prior experiences, and in part because they differ in non-trivial ways. There is much individual variation among any sizeable student population, so variety of method is an effective response. As I have outlined them above, the several components of my courses go a considerable distance, I think, towards adequately addressing the demands of differentiation. The main need, however, is simply to recognize that it's vital for instructors not to put all their evaluative eggs in one basket: we should give students a chance to shine at the things they do best even as we point out where they can improve.

I'll end on this note: In his "Essay on Criticism," Part 3, Alexander Pope says that when you need to teach other people something, you should bear in mind that they "must be taught as if you taught them not; / And things unknown proposed as things forgot." In two elegant lines, Pope sums up the principle of geniality he wants to see in those who would be literary or cultural critics. Over many years, I've found that such geniality goes a long way towards establishing a bond between instructor and students. For all the sophisticated pedagogical theories we encounter these days, I suppose nothing is more important than simple kindness and good humor combined with a sound understanding of one's subject, a willingness to share one's insights, and, above all, a genuine ability to *listen.* Some things never change, and (technological advances notwithstanding) teaching today differs in no essential way from the one in which Plato's Socrates, in the *Meno,* found himself when he drew the answer to a geometry problem from a child by posing simple questions. Setting aside Socrates's doctrine of *anamnesis* (recollection) as rather mystical, we still have a fine fable about where knowledge really comes from: if it is to be integral to the person, it must not be delivered by external agents or means; it must be formed from within.