

Teaching Statement

There is a certain sensation that I have when I know that I am teaching well. Hard to describe—bordering on ineffable—it is a feeling that the words I am saying come from some source beyond myself, or that some external force compels me to lean in to hang onto a student’s words. I know this sensation by the smile that inevitably crosses my face when I think of the perfect technical term that describes what a student is struggling to explain: “interpolation”; “counterfactual”; “bracketing.” I know it when I walk quickly from one end of the classroom to the other, using the whole blackboard to organize information as my students do most of the talking. (*This* is an historian’s way of answering that question; *that* is the sort of evidence favored by political scientists.) I know I am teaching well when my students pick up on the categories I provide and begin to use them; when they extrapolate from one case and apply its insights to another. I know this because I sit down and watch as they look at each other instead of looking at me.

Silence is not an indication that learning is not happening, but I know that my teaching needs work when students are afraid to speak. I know that I have not done my job if their questions are merely requests for more factual information rather than matters of interpretation. If I have not done my job well, my students all agree with one another. When I have not prepared them properly, they feel a little too confident that they know definitively what a given text says or what a specific group thinks. The self-satisfaction of the student who can say “Buddhists believe X” is a sign that my work is incomplete. Who is a Buddhist? Which Buddhists believe X, and which do not? Is *belief* even the right word? What is at stake for us in describing it this way, and just who are “we,” anyway?

The student who opens class discussion in my seminar knows that her job is to summarize the readings and facilitate discussion by asking one or two open-ended questions. She also knows that I have her back. Before she stepped into the classroom she got an email from me sharing with her a loose outline of my lesson plan and learning objectives for the day. She knows that we are a team, and she understands that her job is to take up the slack for her classmates who had to work overtime or had a test or fell asleep while doing the reading. She comes to class having read the material carefully, usually twice, and her notebook is filled with meticulous notes that she has taken not because she is scared of making a fool of herself, but because she knows it will be helpful to others. She is sympathetic with those who have presented before her and wants to provide a good model for those who will present after her. She cares.

Her peers care, too. They listen carefully and their laptops and tablets, if open, display the assigned readings. They do not shop or peruse social networking sites. They do not do these things because they know that I treat them as responsible adults who are capable of self-restraint; they do not do these things because they know that next week or the week after it will be them who is summarizing the readings and wishing that somebody would respond to their own opening questions.

The students care because they know that I care. They hear it in my voice when I share a story from my weekend that illustrates a point from the readings, or when I talk with them honestly about my struggles with the article I am in the midst of writing. They also know I care because I make time. I hold office hours and answer emails and walk with them before and after class. I hold a biweekly coffee hour for those students who prefer an informal setting to raise further questions about course readings or who want to satisfy their curiosity about just what the academic study of religion is and can be. We all know that there is a hierarchy between us that is structured by differences in our academic credentials and life experience. But we also know that we are colleagues who are bound together by our shared curiosity in the same material. To the extent that propriety allows it, we are friends. Like all good friends, we learn from each other. Like all good friends, we forgive each other when we fall short of our ideals, but we nevertheless hold each other to high standards.

When I talk with my students in the classroom or outside of it, I do not simply model for them the behavior that I want them to emulate. I *tell* them that I am modeling so that they have no misunderstandings about what I expect of them. I talk with them about what it means to be intellectually honest, and how being true to one’s sources or faithful to the historical evidence does not require one to change her political views or religious affiliation or deeply held moral convictions. I share with them my own ethical struggles about how to understand the misogyny and racism and warmongering we encounter in our texts, but I do so in a way that makes it clear that the struggles are *mine*. They will have *theirs*, and

if our course does its work then they will have extended practice with some intellectual tools that can help them negotiate those struggles.

Not all of my students hear all of this, and not all of them are ready to take on new interpretive paradigms. I am fine with that. I have to be. Some of the students will already have decided that it is all about the economic bottom line, or about unconscious desires and impulses, or about the workings of patriarchy. For many of them, this suspicious mode of analysis allows them to penetrate the veneer of the ordinary and understand “what is really going on.” It is both a valuable survival strategy in a frequently uncharitable world and a way for them to demonstrate their sophistication as young adults.

So at the end of my class they may not have changed their minds about any given topic, and they may not have greatly deviated from the patterns of interpretation they preferred on day one, but it would not be for lack of opportunity. Short writing assignments and response papers are deliberately and explicitly structured so that they are required to adopt another’s point of view or borrow a heuristic rubric and apply it to a new case. Not all of them will be comfortable with this, but over the semester they will have repeated opportunity to practice and improve upon it.

My students also know that their writing has an audience of more than just one. I model this for them by talking explicitly about how my own research is written for—and received by—an audience of my peers. In seminar courses they also know that their peers in the course will be reading some portion of their writing. They know that good comments always begin with praise for what a person has done well, and then go on to describe what is unclear or could be polished. They know this because they are required to practice commenting on each other’s work; they also know it because they receive written feedback from me on the quality and sophistication of their discussion board posts, on their response papers, and on their research proposals and papers. They see that their audience is invested in helping them do well. They know that my comments are designed to help them speak with clarity and precision.

I can speak the language of pedagogy. I know what classroom management is. I understand that where a teacher places his body in the classroom—standing or sitting—affects how students learn. I know from experience that assessment includes not only evaluations of student learning using both formal and informal methods, but also ideally includes simultaneous evaluation of the instructor. I know that students have different learning styles and needs. I have some practice adjusting for those needs because I formally trained as an elementary school teacher and because I have taught very diverse groups of students: middle schoolers with behavioral disorders, elementary school students at a tribal settlement school, privileged children of diplomats and businesspeople struggling to reintegrate into Japanese society after living for months or years overseas, and students at large state universities and at a private Ivy League institution. If the situation calls for it, I can use these experiences to talk about different types of student motivation and about how teachers’ well-intentioned cultural expectations may miss the mark with certain demographics.

I know that when those of us in the field of higher education say that we want to foster “critical thinking,” we actually mean that we want students to engage in *metacognition*. We want them to think about how they themselves think. We want them to imagine how it might be to think like somebody else. Having fostered those two skills, we want them to think before they speak. We also want them to be able to stand back and observe patterns, to anticipate the potential outcomes of actions and decisions. We want them to be the ones who will stand up and speak the uncomfortable truth when a group of their peers is too eager to rush to a conclusion. We want them to be simultaneously strong and pliable, forthright and empathetic.

I can speak about these things in theoretical terms and in the language of pedagogy: course design, lesson planning, learning outcomes. But I also know that when I walk into the classroom my students do not need a rigorous theory of student motivation, nor do they need a mechanistic program that systematically checks items off of a list. They need a human being who listens sympathetically, disagrees with them civilly, holds them accountable for their work, offers them opportunities to lead and to be heard, and reminds them—and demonstrates for them—that the life of the mind does not end when class is dismissed or when the semester draws to a close.

When I am doing my best teaching, I am that person.