

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?

In large lecture courses, my students and I regularly laugh together. Learning together is pleasurable, even if we wrestle with challenging concepts or try figure out what the author meant with that convoluted sentence or why on earth the director framed a shot that way. When I ask an open-ended question and invite students to talk with each other about it, the room explodes in noise. They were already bursting with opinions and interpretations before they entered the room. They just needed an excuse to share them. When I call for their attention and refocus our discussion, they delight in hearing their classmates’ varied approaches to the same topic. They relish it when I cite their discussion board posts in class. They know that I am reading what they write and they appreciate that their questions are taken seriously.

They also know that the course is oriented around questions rather than content. They know this because I tell them so. I make video syllabi that introduce them to the questions of the course, and many students have watched these videos before the course even begins. I start on day one by situating the course within the college curriculum and emphasizing the transferable skills that it fosters. I also catch their attention with a potentially counterintuitive claim. They may have signed up for a course titled “Japanese Popular Culture,” but every word in that title is misleading. Who counts as Japanese? Who determines what is popular? When should we attribute a practice or idea to “culture,” and when might it be more appropriate to think about the workings of politics, the global economy, gender norms, or historical contingency?

My slideshows subtly reinforce this critical practice by using layering effects, carefully selected background images, open-ended questions, starkly worded declarative statements, and carefully curated video clips. Collectively, these presentation techniques remind students that their job is not to passively accept information, but rather to analyze and then synthesize various types of evidence. Not every lecture is a success, and frankly some of my experiments are utter failures. But I know that the lectures generally work because my students tell me they do. They never had to analyze texts or images in this way, they say. They did not realize that the media they love could be so intimately tied to social problems and political concerns. Having taken my course, they find themselves able to appreciate cultural differences without resorting to essentialist claims. They can analyze a comic or a film in terms of its composition, editing, layout, and style. They can argue persuasively that the category of the *otaku* (geek) performs political work, reflecting concerns about procreative sexuality and capitalist consumption. They can trace industrial similarities in how the characters who populate anime and the idols who staff popular music troupes are both carefully selected and tactically presented to elicit audience desire and maximize affective commitment. They can show how a manga about a robot is not simply a science fiction story, but is also about the politics of who counts as “Japanese” and how we define the limits of the human. They do not just think. They think about how they and others think and have thought.

In my undergraduate seminar, the student who leads discussion knows that her job is to summarize the readings and to facilitate conversation 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 an outline of my lesson plan and some 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 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 am admittedly busy. Like most junior professors I am overextended; like most faculty at research institutions I jealously guard my writing time. But I regularly meet with students outside of class. For some courses I also host film screenings that offer opportunities to have relatively casual yet focused conversations.

Whether in class and outside of it, my students and I all know that there is a hierarchy between us that reflects 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 friends, we learn from each other. Like all friends, we forgive each other when we fall short of our ideals, but we nevertheless hold each other to high standards.

In these conversations, 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 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 make 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. Response papers are 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.

Students in my seminars also know that their writing has an audience of more than just one. I model this for them by talking about how my own work is written for—and received by—an audience of my peers. In seminars they know that their peers will be reading their writing. They know that good comments begin with praise for what a person has done well, and then go on to describe 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 of their discussion board posts, on their

response papers, and on their research proposals and papers. Although I often struggle to return comments to them as quickly as I would like, they see from my comments 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.

And they *do* speak. They do not just share their research in textual form. They also deliver elevator speeches about their work in class. They learn how to make a research pitch. They learn how to pitch their research for different audiences. Papers become topics at Thanksgiving dinner. Romantic partners get earfuls about works in progress. Questions linger even when the course is done. Conversations remain unfinished, and in the most satisfying way.

My graduate seminars add a specific type of professional training not found in my undergraduate courses. Students in my grad seminar learn how to be teachers because I have them develop and critique syllabi. They learn to be autonomous, creative researchers because I have them write manifestos about what the field does well and what it needs to do better. They learn to be peer reviewers by writing comparative book reviews. They learn the *lingua franca* of the humanistic academy by reading theoretical works alongside examples of secondary scholarship that deploy the insights of, for example, Bruno Latour or Judith Butler. Above all, my grad students know that the purpose of the seminar is to endow them with *confidence*. They need this because like all people in the academy they suffer from imposter syndrome. They need this because assuredness is a basic prerequisite for getting a job in the professoriate.

In seminar, I stress the importance of being a good departmental citizen, explain the intricacies of the peer review process, describe how the *real* conversation after an academic lecture sometimes takes place in the spaces between the polite questions that people ask or in private discussions between audience members afterward. I tell them very explicitly that I am socializing them so that they have no misconceptions about the expectations of our guild. In mentoring them, I regularly break the frame of the conversation to point out things that others might assume are obvious. I help them become attuned to interpersonal dynamics, to departmental politics, to the importance of being intellectually charitable and relentlessly curious.

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 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 public state universities and private Ivy League institutions. 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 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.