

“One must be an inventor to read well.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson “The American Scholar

What is Learning?

bell hooks writes, "I entered the classroom with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer...[a conception of] education as the practice of freedom.... education that connects the will to know with the will to become. Learning is a place where paradise can be created." My pedagogy and classroom practice developed out of a critical engagement with effective teaching practice and theory. As a teacher, scholar, and member of the academic community, I am first and foremost a citizen who cares about my students and their development. I, therefore, define learning as knowledge building that takes place in the interaction between individuals and communities. Because knowledge building is a critical aspect of my pedagogy, I work to facilitate community in each of my classrooms: a community of writers, thinkers, and readers. I believe that an active community of learners enables us to step outside of ourselves and engage in not only how we were socialized to think and interact with the world, but to see the possibilities that change the way we think and interact.

Learning Goals

Though I teach a broad variety of courses, my learning goals tend to revolve around the same ideas: community and collaboration, conflict and difference, reflection and praxis, and critical personhood. I typically incorporate these goals via three rhetorical practices.

- To engage students with writing and reading as a social and epistemological process, and as articulations of ideologies that allow us to make sense of our world.
- To reflect on rhetoric and writing as a social assessment process, which asks students to consider how knowledge is constructed in communities by ideologies, perspectives and beliefs
- To explore rhetoric and literacy practices as a political process of citizen formation, recognizing power dynamics and the relationship between power and knowledge

In order to accomplish these broad goals, I ask students, in a variety of ways, to reflect on the relationship of rhetoric, writing, and learning to agency, citizenship, common sense, and logic. We work together in the classroom to think about assignments, assessment practices and class activities so that students are able to engage in a meta-critique of their own process as thinkers, writers and readers.

Course Design

In my classroom, throughout the semester, I work with students to co-construct assignment criteria and assessment rubrics so that students are able to articulate the various questions, concepts, and skills that a text or idea we are working with asks of them. When we write in the classroom, we frequently engage in a consideration of how the writing will or should be assessed, what purpose we have for each other, and how we can identify performance. Group activities are a crucial part of my classroom because they allow us to reach consensus not only about day-to-day classroom business, but also about the larger concepts we discuss. I work as a mediator and a facilitator in the

classroom in order to encourage complicated thinking and analysis of our own dispositions towards ideologies, social and political practices, writing and knowledge. It is crucial in my classroom that writing, reflection and assessment of writing are integrated to create space for democratic participation and student-teacher praxis. It is my hope that as the semester progresses students forward their own ideas and insights without continued prompting. In this model, collaboration is used to engage in discussions from a variety of positions, articulating and questioning commonplace assumptions, and values. I design activities that address the following:

- Writing as social process
- Exploration to build agency and community through collaboration
- Embrace difference by situating knowledge and searching for a multiplicity of voices
- Incorporate reflection
- Ask about the relationship of knowledge, power, and citizenship
- Think about multimodal expression and technology in writing

Assessment

At a variety of stages in each assignment, I design assessment activities that engage students in each other's work, allowing them to reflect on the decisions they've made in their projects and articulate revision strategies. Ultimately these activities ask the students to produce a theory of practice for future writing by confronting and discussing the evolving judgment of writing. I use portfolio assessment in all of my classrooms in order to provide a map for measuring performance over the course of the semester. I conference with students at least twice a semester over their portfolios, and at the end of the semester they write a reflective piece about their experience as a part of a community of writers. They discuss successful techniques that they have developed, progress that they have made, as well as issues that need further attention. We work together to make decisions about their course grades by looking at the various evaluations we've collected in the portfolio. I use their reflections, as well as standardized university evaluations to reflect on my teaching each semester.

What I have Learned

By working with students in all aspects of thinking, reading and writing, my classroom provides the students an environment in which they have agency in their education. It allows them to reflect powerfully, and revise their work by making decisions as writers and as learners. They begin to approach their learning as a set of critical decisions that are made recursively. I have discovered that I am better at reading, writing, assessing and teaching when I engage as a life-long learning along with my students. In this way, learning becomes more effective for writer-citizens as community participants.

Student Feedback

My standardized student evaluation feedback has remained consistent throughout the years that I have taught. Each semester, 1 being best and 5 being worst, I regularly average a between a 1 and a 1.6. The worst evaluation I have ever gotten was a 2, and it was from an Intermediate Writing course that I taught at MSU. The evaluation resulted in what the students considered to be too little guiding information in their writing

assignments. In that particular course, students were frustrated by a change in culture, they expected to be told exactly what to write and I believe that the writing process is more organic than a top-down instruction model. My students and I had long discussions about the nature of writing in academic and social environments but, for me, the 2 represented a issue in adequately introducing the concept. In my writing classes since, I have had very good response to allowing more introductory time for community building.

In my students' portfolios, their final reflection is typically in a letter, answering questions that we have developed such as "Reflect on your experience as a writer over the course of the semester. What have you learned that stands out the most?" I ask students to reflect on their experiences as writers, thinkers, readers, citizens, and as students. In each category I ask them questions in order to facilitate reflection on their work and experiences, requiring them to refer specifically to their projects to support their analysis. I regularly get feedback such as, "My writing improved a lot. I can think about how to approach writing now instead of just sitting down to do it" (ENG 201: Intermediate Writing, Fall 2009). I have also received feedback such as, "Even though it was hard at first, now I don't feel like I need a teacher to tell me exactly what she wants. I can think about the writing situation myself" (ENG 113: Introduction to Prose). I receive engaged feedback on the classroom as well, that has consistently been a richer discussion than that of my standardized evaluations. Because the students are critically engaged in reflection, the think thoroughly about their classroom experience and their feedback allows me recursive reflection and adjustment in my teaching. One student's evaluation, from my ENG 625: Composition Theory course particularly resonated: "I constantly feel like I'm changing between teacher and student in grad school. I teach 101 and I take courses and that has always felt mutually exclusive. In this course I learned that being a teacher means being a student. I just wish you had told me on the first day-it took me all semester to figure out, but I guess that's part of being a teacher as well."