

Teaching Philosophy

“A fundamental belief in the students is more important than anything else.”

Adrienne Rich

While I tailor my pedagogy to the unique dynamics of each course and group of students, there are two, foundational elements that have carried across all of my six years of teaching composition:

- (1) integration of public rhetorics and students’ prior knowledges;
- (2) inclusion of multiple opportunities for student choice and community building in course materials, assignments, and discussions.

Palpable in both of these pedagogical moves is my commitment to drawing concrete connections between the reading and writing skills covered in my classroom and students’ social and cultural realities. These connections are best achieved through an investigation of writing as cultural recovery and production.

What I found most frustrating as a first-generation, working-class student was the disconnect between what I was learning in my college classrooms and the practicality of this knowledge outside of academic spaces. As such, my teaching philosophy is most informed by my pursuit to connect students to their writing on multiple levels, and to demonstrate that critical writing skills, such as argumentation and rhetorical awareness, are vital for success in any writing situation, discipline or profession.

In integrating everyday rhetorics and asking students to draw on their previous knowledge in my assignments, I aim to promote student investment and provide them with skills they can use to navigate writing conventions across disciplines and contexts. For instance, I often begin my first-year composition courses with a media literacy narrative, which allows students to investigate the cultural or social implications of the media they consume. In this and similar assignments, I strive to incorporate opportunities for students to share and work from their own linguistic and communication practices. Doing so establishes a connection between their own experiences and the broader cultural and social trends that they explore through their writing during the remainder of the semester.

Assignments like these enable students to reflect, as they develop critical understandings of the cultural texts they read and write. By presenting this type of critical social thought as inevitably rhetorical in nature, I help students craft a rhetorical dexterity that is situated in familiar, and meaningful contexts. More specifically, I integrate diverse texts and assignments that highlight the nuances and material effects of rhetoric. For instance, one assignment that I regularly implement is a rhetorical analysis of a public place. Students investigate the place as it functions within the greater culture it is a part of, while also incorporating considerations of the rhetorical appeals traditionally applied to written texts. Through this assignment,

students engage with rhetoric as it manifests in the social places with which they are already familiar. As a result, students learn not only how to craft effective composition, but culturally relevant, and even critical, responses to the realities in which they function. In fact, students regularly comment on this assignment in their end-of-course evaluations as being one of the most rewarding and challenging inquiries they complete.¹

In addition to these examples, I draw connections between academic and non-academic contexts in my classroom through a presentation of genre as socially constructed, as informed by Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi's genre theory. I encourage my students to expand their definitions of "writing" and "rhetoric" beyond that of academic discourse, to see genre as an everyday occurrence in which they participate and can effect change. In doing so, students gain an appreciation of genre as a lived, social activity that influences their actions well beyond the context of my course. In essence, I aim to present writing as a cultural construction that can and should be investigated for its social significance.

In addition to integrating the rhetorics and knowledges that my students regularly engage in outside of my classroom, I strive to encourage student choice as much as possible. Inspired by feminist pedagogies (e.g., hooks; Jarratt; Rich), I aim to create a classroom in which my students and I are equal partners in understanding and creating rhetoric that is grounded in collective experience. For example, I regularly ask students to vote on upcoming readings and assignments, soliciting and integrating their feedback into my course design as the semester progresses. In addition, students provide me with anonymous feedback at several points in the semester on the overall progress of the course and the assessment they have received. Finally, I engage in collaborative rubric design with my students, much in the same manner that Asao Inoue outlines, ensuring that they comprehend the metrics by which their work will be assessed.

I also create opportunities for student choice through my integration of process writing, as my students compose multiple drafts from different perspectives for each assignment. Process writing empowers students to individually and collaboratively explore their writing processes, while also enhancing students' community building through peer teaching. All of my writing courses culminate in an evaluative portfolio in which students revise assignments of their choice and reflect on their progress over the semester. This portfolio allows students to engage with writing as a process that builds towards a product they can be proud of, ultimately elevating their confidence as writers. Through this focus on reflection both in the portfolio and in informal reflections at the end of each assignment and unit, students become critically aware of the moments in the course in which they effectively recontextualized their prior knowledge and skills to meet different writing exigencies.

¹ I am happy to provide copies of my student evaluations upon request.

This emphasis on student choice also enhances my community-based approach to teaching composition. In addition to integrating readings and assignments that engage with the local community, I also strive to maintain an atmosphere of collaboration in every course. Through group activities, individual and group presentations, peer editing, and class discussions, my students learn from each other as well as myself, and I in turn, learn from them.

In all of these aspects of my pedagogy, my ultimate goal is to create a critical and open environment for collective meaning making, in which students can develop their individual voice and style and appreciate the malleability of rhetoric. By doing so, I hope to help students develop a “sociocritical literacy” (Gutierrez) that can better prepare them not only for the academic writing conventions they will encounter, but also the varied discourses they will engage in both within and outside of academia.

*C.C. Hendricks, Doctoral Candidate
Composition and Cultural Rhetoric
Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, & Composition
Syracuse University
crhen100@syr.edu*

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