

Teaching Philosophy  
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What is America? What is the South? What is a border? Depending on the particular course topic, I ask my students to answer one of these questions on the first day, and again on the last day. They spend every day working toward an idiosyncratic understanding of geo-social constructs based on scholarly research and writing, a process informed by fifteen weeks spent collaborating with each other on assignments that cross genres of literature and rhetoric. If by the end of the course they can even simply admit that they do not know, I consider it a successful semester, as they have worked to develop the critical analysis skills to question their own assumptions about identity. My students typically fall along the full spectrum of racial and social privilege and marginalization. The initial answers to my questions usually reflect the fantasies of white hegemony that are even now prevalent in the popular imaginary. I use my own academic specialties as a scholar of the political rhetoric within regional literature and its uses in the racialized national project, to give my students the critical tools to rethink narrative structures of power. I accomplish this by assigning texts that challenge the American literary canon while amplifying marginalized voices and providing multimodal assignments that teach the transfer of analytical writing skills across majors.

The texts I choose are meant to ensure that my students can confront their own privilege or promote the voices of those who have been marginalized in their past encounters with English literature and writing courses. In an introductory course, Writing About Literature, I assigned texts based on a Western American literature theme—an under-represented genre in most literary courses. Students read Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* short story collection, Albert Race Sample's Texas prison farm memoir *Racehoss*, and Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*. These texts allowed students to spend the semester exploring the authenticity of the cowboy paradigm, latinx feminism vs machismo, and the racialization of the prison industrial complex. This particular course was such a welcome change in material for multiple students, that they signed up for one of my upper-level courses, Life and Literature of the American South. In each of my courses, I assign literary texts that are challenging in their subject matter in order to give students a field of play that allows them to think outside of the margins when they choose their analytical approach. The best analytical work is highly creative since it is based on original lines of thought and personalized approaches—figuring out what works for them in terms of technical brainstorming and revising strategies, as well as their physical environment and setting.

Many students feel neither safe nor seen in English courses that are traditionally geared toward rewarding adherence to a standard way of communicating ideas through formal essays based upon close readings of canonical white, male authorship. While I teach formal essay-writing as a practical necessity and rhetorical foundation for my students, I also look to innovative digital formats to reflect the reality of a professional world that places a premium on rapidly composed and digested communicative forms. Each semester I assign at least one major digital project emphasizing the material historical context of a primary text. For example, in a Texas Literature course, the students collaborated in groups to create a digital repository for archival material based on the imagined lifestyle of the major characters in a text from the course. One of the groups created a digital home tour for the nineteenth century border hacienda of the Mendoza y Soria family from Jovita González and Eve Raleigh's *Caballero*, showcasing each family

member's imagined clothing, reading material, and favorite pastime. During the process of conceptualizing and creating the online repository, each group was also responsible for short blogs documenting their progress and acting as course-wide "publicity" for their exhibits. I use these types of non-traditional creative assignments to illustrate the creative side of textual analysis in a hands-on mode.

I emphasize a collaborative environment in my courses and to this end assign major group projects each semester. In order to create an early strategic support system within the classroom, I assign the groups as soon as possible to ensure that the students have a basis for frequent peer review workshops. It also provides a sense of community and a point of reference for notes, studying, and peer support outside the classroom. Even when given material and assignments they can relate to, not every person is comfortable speaking out in front of an entire classroom, yet the experience of doing so remains important in order to prepare them for the likely necessity of public speaking in their future as students and professionals. Every semester the student groups are each responsible for a fish bowl discussion—five students act as an expert panel on the reading for the day by conducting the discussion and answering questions from the class while I act as a moderator. This approach ensures that everyone has at least one heavy participation day, and it provides an early peer review workshop for critical approaches to the text.

Over the course of my time as a teacher, I have been responsible for 845 students. Most of my students are non-English majors, and one of my personal mandates as an instructor is to provide lessons that are ultimately applicable for the entire gamut of students, from STEM to Liberal Arts. I teach my students to apply rigorous research standards to their theses and question their own confirmation bias—an error in scholarship that is found even at the highest level of published academic work in the humanities. I use a scaffolding technique as part of my practical pedagogy and a process that builds a knowledge base beginning with the fundamentals of research and analytical thought through critical reading and writing. I start with formal lessons on how to find and query the appropriate library databases for sources. While they learn the fundamentals of scholarly research, I incorporate the basics of academic writing—building a working thesis, supporting an argument, drafting, and revising. Towards the end of the semester, I provide opportunities for archival research as an introduction to various forms of primary sources.

This is why I teach—writing is the most important analytical skill and has the most profound effect on the individual ability to reason. To draft and revise an argument is to confront your own ideas multiple times. If I can teach someone to use their research to shape their opinions rather than the other way around, I have used my own skill set to its utmost potential. By asking loaded questions about geo-social constructs and requiring my students to decide on the answers for themselves through an ongoing research and writing cycle, I am giving them a foundation for success on their own terms.