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Statement of Philosophy for Teaching

*"The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion."*  
Thomas Paine

Every classroom is a potential site of conflicting beliefs, values, affiliations, desires, and identities, the exploration of which has perhaps never been more challenging in light of our current cultural climate. But embracing this challenge offers a means for developing critical thinking skills, a greater awareness of one's cultural logics and location, and a deeper understanding and respect for other people, cultures and perspectives; goals that I feel have never been more urgent. These objectives underscore the design of my classes, and I choose my course material and methods in ways that encourage students to embrace critical reflection, engage difference, deconstruct 'common sense,' and consider the ways the messages and structure of the media are related to how they conceptualize the world.

I believe the most rewarding educational strategies seek to effectively link the students' understandings, experiences, and interests to considerations of larger questions beyond the classroom, illuminating how the students themselves are implicated in those concerns. Such a pedagogical approach implicitly rejects the 'banking concept' of education, stressing personal enrichment and intellectual growth over mechanistic testing and an emphasis on grades. Admittedly, this approach can at times run counter to student expectations (as well today's preoccupation with grade point averages and the social pressures related to "achievement"). Yet by enacting a liberatory design and character to the classrooms I enter, students are encouraged and empowered to consider new ways of thinking about their education and its purpose.

Founded on candid, robust, yet respectful dialogue, utilizing collaborative discussions, structured lessons, guest speakers, media examples, and the campus community at large (lectures, events, etc.), the class serves as a multi-dimensional canvas for delineating how the issues raised in class and the readings therein actually pertain to the students' lives. It utilizes writing assignments and group projects that draw upon contemporary events as a means to explore their greater complexity, encouraging students to think beyond tendencies for cultural myopia and outside their 'cultural box.' And it seeks to assess the students in accordance to their participation, the developing sophistication of their thinking, and their inclination to critically examine and trace the complex nuances of the subject matter at hand. Accomplishing this means continually and enthusiastically investing oneself fully in the pedagogical mission, utilizing all the resources at one's disposal – new media technologies, enhanced instructional support from teaching assistants and campus services, enacting new forms of discourse in the classroom, etc. – to reach the students on new terms – ones that are interpersonal and affirming. To the point, something as simple as taking the time to wander about the large lecture hall prior to class, chatting informally with a myriad of students across the semester and actually getting to know each of them – their names, their perspectives, their concerns – while simultaneously sharing a bit of one's own identity beyond that of 'professor' – can go a long way to fundamentally reconfiguring conceptions of educational authority as it is traditionally conceptualized and deployed. In turn, perceptions of the class shift for the students from being a series of lectures and testing formats to be deciphered and surmounted to being a place for critical reflection and self-discovery about the world and one's place in it.

Of course, one's pedagogical authority is never entirely erased or displaced. As such, one is nonetheless forced as an instructor to provide grades. But my larger goal as a teacher is to foster within my students a life-long curiosity toward learning, greater complexity in their vision and thinking, sensitivity to issues of diversity and social justice, and the practice of thoughtful reflection regarding the choices they make in their lives, as well as to help them develop the processes by which they construct and interpret media texts and meaning, and the broader implications of such determinations. In short, these are skills that reinforce the ideals of building their total character above all else and that positions the discussion of broader morals, values, and ethics into any subject I teach that reach into the student's professional development.

For me, the act of teaching is a process of daily reflection and evaluation which begins at the conclusion of each class, with assessments generally resting on whether I was effective in stimulating thinking and excitement toward the course material and goals. Those days when I feel I fall short can be powerfully disheartening, yet they similarly inspire me with an urgency to invest more time and effort into our next meeting. Those days when learning occurs – when the end of class comes too quickly for everyone – on those days, a little lift occurs in my soul, reminding me that I was a small part of making meaningful connections between lives. In those moments, my hopes for the world, humanity, and the future are revitalized, and I am stirred anew in my efforts to communicate and pass on the values embodied in the aforementioned tenets so eloquently stated by Thomas Paine. To realize these slight yet powerfully significant moments – when it is clear that a student has begun to recognize not only how they have been empowered by the development of their critical thinking skills, but also their moral responsibility to participate more broadly as citizens in constructing a more inclusive human and global community – this is why I teach.