

Heather McCoy

Teaching Philosophy

I consider myself fortunate throughout my teaching career to have been in continual dialogue with others who share my enthusiasm for language teaching. From my days as an eager yet somewhat unsure teaching assistant at Brown University to my time as an experienced instructor here at Penn State, I have been able to develop my own reflective teaching practice because of the common pursuit I have shared with fellow language teachers, colleagues from other disciplines, instructional technologists, and other interested parties. We have all considered together the same question in a variety of forms: why do we teach the way we do, and how might we do what we do differently?

I operate from the first principle that my role as a teacher is to facilitate meaningful interaction that enable students to create new knowledge for themselves. This simple learning objective is at the heart of what we should concern ourselves with as language teachers and it informs every assignment and class activity that I design.

In all the courses I teach I am primarily concerned with creating a level-appropriate curriculum that allows students to interact with the object of study through assignments that speak to their own motivations and objectives. At every turn I seek to create opportunities for students to personalize their experience in the class through the use of individual questionnaires that require them to identify and articulate their reasons for taking the course, as well as the use of learning tools such as student portfolios which allow students to present their best work and get a sense of their own learning over time.

I seek to maintain an awareness of the role of French and French Studies in the undergraduate curriculum as I try to design courses that bridge the gap between French and other disciplines. When teaching elementary or intermediate language courses, this takes the form of showing students how learning French can teach them about their own language; in a general education film and culture class, I help students make connections between French culture and the American cinematic tradition; in a business French class I create assignments that help students see that understanding business language is more than a question of translation but rather an interpretive act that is grounded in understanding and making sense of a different way of being in the world, a way that is firmly rooted within cultural tradition; and finally in a 400 level foreign language pedagogy course, I assist students in connecting their own practical experience as language learners with a theoretical understanding of second language acquisition. I have found that as French teachers we need to make the case to students for what we do by continually demonstrating that French is not only a worthy object of study in and of itself but also a powerful tool which can help them forge new connections with their other areas of scholarship and career interest.

My aim is for students to leave our class not only with an enhanced knowledge of our object of study but also a heightened sense of literacy and cultural competence. I want them to feel that not only have they been exposed to new language forms and cultural artifacts but they have also acquired the ability to situate what they have learned within a larger context, a wider frame of reference, and that this new knowledge of French and French Studies can change all of us in unexpected ways.