

## Sarah K. Rich Teaching Philosophy

The teacher's first job, especially in an undergraduate course, is to convey the pleasure of curiosity. All of my students, no matter their major or career plans, are more likely to succeed in the future if they learn that a life steered by curiosity leads to adventure, joy and a more productive connection to the world. Teaching, especially in the humanities, should thus demonstrate a way of looking at the world that is directed by questions, rather than by easy answers, and it should encourage a mode of dwelling that is steeped in wonder, rather than fear of the unknown.

As I teach the history of objects and images, my goal is often to emphasize the strangeness of the past-its otherness, which may force us to question the ostensible unassailability of present solutions. My favorite question is, "What is strange about this object?" Students who assumed that they knew an image at first sight suddenly change their posture. They squint at the image. That moment of total silence that accompanies a room of 350 students trying to figure out a pictorial puzzle is one of my favorite sounds. Even better is the sound of those students giggling in assent when one of them hazards a guess. Best of all is the collective cheer when yet another student, recognizing a kernel in the previous guess, refines it to produce a convincing solution.

Curiosity needs to be learned by doing. It requires participation. For that reason, every class should be a discussion section. Everyone must feel as if he or she is part of the conversation. In large lecture classes, this means that I have to do the Oprah thing. I get out from behind the lectern, walk to a remote district of the room, and proffer the microphone to a student who is avoiding eye contact. Then I wait with her. No matter what she says, there is going to be a good direction to go from where she begins. For the first week, this process is tense. By the end of the semester, the whole class is usually a boisterous affair where most of the class wants to pose a question or make a comment. Lectures are not fact-delivery monologues, in other words, but problem solving opportunities in which the entire class is asked to respond to the material, to me and to each other.

My classes are also site specific. Students need to recognize and capitalize upon the resources of their physical environment. Even in a culture that is increasingly inflected by the internet, where spatial boundaries are porous, there is a great deal to be said for encouraging students to investigate their surroundings more thoroughly. This semester in Art History 100, for example, I have sent my students out on an architectural scavenger hunt--they had to find Ionic columns, a basilica, antefixes and other examples of classical architecture on campus. All of a sudden, buildings they thought they knew gained new richness, and a history that seemed remote came much closer. In almost all of my classes I also require that my students write about works of art in the Palmer Museum. In an age of digital images we are losing our capacity to understand how the texture or actual size of an object might contribute, in specific and concrete ways, to the function of that object. In writing about actual objects in the room, rather than on a page or screen, students gain a fuller understanding of how images work their magic. They also gain a better appreciation of the resources that the university puts at their disposal. At the same time, I am eager to help students discover the art offerings of the larger region in which we live. This means that I take students on field trips--usually to New York to see art at the Metropolitan Museum and in Chelsea galleries, but sometimes I take them to Washington D. C., Baltimore or Pittsburgh.

My approach is not terribly sophisticated, nor is it technologically spectacular, but it is engaging as well as effective, and it is the only kind of teaching I like doing. And I believe that the teacher's visible pleasure in teaching is one of the most important devices by which students learn that a life of the mind is worth pursuing.