

Teaching Philosophy

As I took my seat at the Middle Eastern Studies Annual Meeting to watch a documentary about the effects of climate change in Tunisia, I felt a tap on my shoulder. To my surprise, it was Sam McNeil, who had been a student of mine a few years earlier. Sam, I learned, had earned a dual master's degree in journalism and Middle Eastern Studies and the documentary was his. As Sam eagerly told me about his time in Tunisia and the Excellence in International Journalism award that he had just been awarded, he was also highlighting how he had applied learnings from our classroom to his drive to fight for a healthy planet. This moment exemplifies my goal as an educator: to provide students with the knowledge and tools that build their capacity to contribute in the classroom and far beyond.

I work to establish the teaching/learning process as a partnership, which, as a way of doing things, involves several dynamic elements:

"Learn through not about," is the first principle that I strive to apply in my courses. I invite students into active and interdisciplinary engagement with the texts we read. Through group discussions, individual and collaborative research, as well as prompted and self-directed written assignments, we collectively piece together multi-perspectival interpretations that accentuate the nuances of both the text and the context from within which it emerges. It is through comparing and contrasting texts by women authors from various regions in the Global South, for instance, that students reflect on the complex configurations of female subjectivity and agency. Starting with the primary texts enriches the learning partnership with students, because it helps us avoid reiterating preexisting views and interpretations and allows students to bring their own perspectives and experiences into the classroom.

Second, successful partnership requires engaged partners. With that in mind, I emphasize my role as a facilitator and activate multiple techniques to encourage dynamic engagement. For instance, I often mobilize warm-up activities to encourage participation and integrate students' preexisting knowledge. To enrich students' motivation and individuality, I provide them with opportunities to make meaningful choices about the content or format of class assignments. Incorporating creative alternatives to traditional research options, such as creating podcasts, videos, and visual projects, has been a consistent practice in my courses. Moreover, working with a generation that grew up with technology, I seize every opportunity to engage students using the tools that work best for them, whether by mobilizing Penn State courseware platforms such as Top Hat or by engaging online applications such as Quizlet and Kahoot.

Third, I offer students an ownership stake in the course. When designing a course, part of my syllabus belongs to students and comes with an invitation to bring in relevant material of their choice for the class to discuss. In addition to enriching the course by opening it up to diverse interests and approaches, this practice gives students a vested interest in the learning process. Similarly, I ask for students' feedback at intervals during the semester, using anonymous surveys. While their feedback helps me identify potential problem areas and continuously tune my course to students' needs, it also reinforces their agency in the learning process.

Fourth, partnership entails creating a safe, welcoming, and equitable learning environment, where all students feel that they belong. This kind of environment is built through an attentiveness to students' needs and learning styles as well as their backgrounds and social conditions. In addition to providing adaptive participation opportunities and instructional and feedback styles, I incorporate a variety of materials and activities that help cultivate meaningful conversation and collaboration across differences and allow students with diverse backgrounds to personally connect. To provide each student with the support they need, I run surveys early in the semester to assess their goals, needs, and access to different types of academic and non-academic support. Taking a genuine interest in learning about each student and their unique experience helps establish trust and allows me to form a bond with them so they feel valued.

Finally, my commitment to partnership also propels my own learning journey, wherein I encounter students as an invaluable source of knowledge and new perspectives. Every contribution and opinion, especially those that do not echo my own, help expand my own capacity, in terms of pedagogy, but also in terms of expanding my personal awareness and sensitivity. Ultimately the learning partnership is one that students can apply in their lives outside of the classroom. That is why when I saw the depth of Sam's work, I was so proud of him. Sam's commitment to the learning partnership had grown and become entirely his own. And even more moving to me was witnessing him as he shared his work with others, inviting them to join in the partnership.