

A Narrative of Teaching, by MaryEllen Higgins

I often ask students to write about the pivotal moments in their lives. One pivotal moment for me, as an undergraduate student, was an interaction that I had with Dr. Rodney Delasanta, a Chaucer scholar, during his office hours. I do not remember many details about that conversation, except that at some point, he referred to me as an intellectual. I had always admired intellectuals, and I dreamed of becoming a professor, but I had never, before that moment, thought of myself as a serious thinker. That day, I floated. Today, one of the greatest rewards for me as an educator is to see my students rise proudly to challenging occasions, to invest in their intellects, and to regard themselves as serious thinkers. In every assignment, and in every class discussion, I dedicate my attention to recognizing the intellectual energy of my students. One student sent me an email message in 2011 about his experience in my 2008 Writing in the Social Sciences class. He communicated that he had found, in a box, some graded papers from my class that he had saved. "I remember how challenging your class was," he wrote, "but I also remember that I began to take pride in my writing from that semester forward." He reflected, "out of my four years in college, the greatest skill I learned came out of your guidance." Knowing that I have played a part in helping students to see the tremendous value of their own intellectual endeavors is one of the finest pleasures of my teaching.

I keep notes that I receive from students in order to celebrate our lasting connections. The enduring connections that I value are not only between myself and individual students; in all of my classes, I ask students to find connections among interdisciplinary scholarly ideas, creative writing, the poetic images of cinema, and their own personal experiences and interests. I ask them to write and to present to in order to make connections with others. In my Social Justice and the Image course, a new course I designed in support of Integrative Studies, students make connections between their own artful creations, the work of international artists, scholarly theories about justice, and the creations of other students in the class. What I discovered in this class was that the exchanges that they had with each other—especially by sharing their experiences with injustice—lasted well beyond the course. In one student's reflection essay on that class, she wrote, "my experience in this course was eye-opening and jaw-dropping at times. I have made friends and built support systems in a very unconventional way." In every class, as in this one, I ask students not only to learn individually from their readings and their explorations of library resources, but to teach me and their peers something new. I ask them to devote a significant amount of writing to describing what they have learned from each other. Consequently, we all develop the practice of regarding each other as engaged members of a learning community that reaches well beyond our class.

In the University's Strategic Plan there are six essential foundations. I have been especially dedicated to the foundations of Engaging Our Students, Fostering and Embracing a Diverse World, and Enhancing Global Engagement. In my role as a member of the Teaching International Executive Committee, I initiated our campus's Student Research and Creativity Conference in 2004. I am now my campus's Undergraduate Research and Honors Coordinator, and our Conference has grown into a lively biannual event in which students participate actively as discoverers and communicators of knowledge and creative expression. I have led several embedded study-trips abroad for our students. The program in Vietnam, which I coordinated in 2012 with a colleague in history, was especially moving. American and Vietnamese students read short stories by American and Vietnamese authors together. They compared and contrasted how narratives of the war in Vietnam were communicated to them personally, and then bonded over how devastating it would be to be at war with each another. Like the students in my Social Justice and the Image class, the students in this course became a part of an eye-opening, caring community. A student once commented on my SRTEs that "Dr. Higgins has the energy of 10,000 suns." My energy is far more limited than the sun, but for the energy that is generated in my classroom, my students are those suns.

I extend the practice of fostering learning communities in my close collaborations with, and mentorship of, fellow faculty. In 2017, my campus's chancellor asked if I would work with other faculty leaders to build what we call "pedagogies of hope in difficult times." We have designed ongoing campus meetings and retreats in which we think collaboratively about how to support students who are suffering from stressful social and economic conditions. In this endeavor, I bring my study of trauma to establish, following care ethics theorists and practitioners, an ethic of care in our teaching. I have worked with colleagues to promote an awareness of how we frame our conversations with students whose absences, late assignments, and other behaviors may be indicators of debilitating doubt and overwhelming hardship. I ask my peers to maintain their high academic standards, but also be conscious of the ways in which students can benefit from our compassion. A former student in my 2012 Introduction to Critical Reading class sent me an email in 2014, thanking me for being "a bright spot in what was kind of a difficult period in my life." At the heart of my pedagogy is the practice of recognition, exchange, and fostering agency—through attention, empathy and understanding—all of which matter deeply in the process of learning.