

Teaching Philosophy—Erik Fuhrer

In each course I teach, I try to leverage students' individual voices by ensuring that the classroom is a place where they feel not only safe enough but also brave enough to express their opinions. Recently, I most successfully accomplished this by framing my writing courses with a discussion of bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, in which students learn to see education as the practice of freedom. Following hooks, I make sure to model the same vulnerability in discussions and activities that I ask of the students in order to make them feel more comfortable having uncomfortable conversations as well as to build true solidarity with the students. While teaching Community Based Writing and Rhetoric courses at the University of Notre Dame, I was one of the few professors teaching this class type that actually performed the service alongside the students, including memorizing and reciting a monologue during the final performance. The result was that the students felt that I was as invested in the course as I was asking them to be. One reason I began to frame my courses with hook's text was to emphasize that issues related to social justice are integral to the structure of any course and classroom. It is important to me that each student's voice is heard and valued and that conversations represent the diversity of the classroom. To this end, I make sure every reading list for the courses I teach is diverse and leverage multiple viewpoints and cultures. I also designed a writing assignment which leverages students' varied forms of English by asking them to write an essay in their own vernacular, even if this means switching between languages. They are then asked to write an analysis of their vernacular work in academic English, thereby emphasizing the latter as a necessary genre while at the same time encouraging students to appreciate the diversity of their linguistic and cultural expression. This assignment represents my philosophy on teaching in that it harnesses the diversity of the class and minimizes educational and linguistic hierarchies to maximize learning for all students. I have taught a similar version of this assignment at St. John's University, and Suffolk Community College.

Since I want my classroom to be a safe space where students feel comfortable expressing themselves and taking ownership over their learning, I frequently ask students to reflect on the work they are doing in class so that they may track their progress throughout the semester. I believe reflection is a key part of learning, as it helps students process their thoughts and feelings and encourages them to articulate not only what they are being asked to do but why they are being asked to do it. Reflection also enables them to gauge the benefit they are seeing from various discussions and assignments. Sometimes these reflections will be kept private, other times they will be shared with me, and at key moments during the semester we will engage in a meta-discussion of the course goals and debate what might be done better going forward. I always make it a point to emphasize that these reflections are not just perfunctory but that they do shape the way I run the class, encouraging students to see themselves as fellow builders of the class environment. In one instance, a student told me that they and their group had found my list of guiding questions to be limiting and that they wished they had more freedom over what to initially focus on. Based on their feedback, I still handed out the guiding questions in the next class but added space for each student to write their own question. I gave them some time at the beginning of the class to formulate the question and then put them into groups, as usual. What I noticed was not necessarily more discussion, as that had never been a problem, but more enthusiasm as each student felt like they had a particular stake in the day's topic. I privately

thanked the student for their suggestion in order to demonstrate that I value their opinion and have added a space for an optional additional question in every course I have since taught.

In my writing classes I assign a manifesto and give students absolute freedom over the topic and medium of the project. The only requirement is that they create something that expresses a change they want to see in the world. They are free to construct something multimodal, a handmade object, or something more traditional like a poster or essay in order to convey this desired change. They are also asked to write a rhetorical analysis of their manifesto, in which they must clearly articulate their intended audience and argument as well as provide broader contextualization for their project. The manifesto is a major assignment that takes nearly half of the semester to complete. In order to provide consistent direction for the project, I show them diverse historical and contemporary examples of the manifesto form, facilitate numerous peer review sessions, and discuss the project with them one on one at least twice during office hours. This requires a lot of individual attention on my part but I find that the truly remarkable work the students produce is well worth it. The beauty of the assignment is that each project is vastly different and showcases something unique about each student.

In the spring of 2017, I had one student develop a feminist mobile as their manifesto. The top of the mobile is a literal glass ceiling covered with pejoratives that have been used to debase women in society, so that whoever walks underneath the mobile will at least partially experience what the oppression of being a woman feels like. It also allows for a more hopeful message, as once one steps out from under the mobile one is faced with inspirational feminist messages that reveal the potentiality for change. The director of gender studies at Notre Dame discussed the project with the student as it was being crafted, came to their final class presentation, and asked if it could be displayed in the gender studies office, where it currently hangs. Another student's manifesto, a video which depicts and critiques the way mainstream media and society construct a narrow idea of femininity, was named an honorable mention for Notre Dame's Undergraduate Library Research Award. Both students wrote compelling and well-written rhetorical analyses of their own work that demonstrated a strong understanding of the purpose of their project. In 2018, these two students presented their manifestos alongside my presentation on the pedagogical benefits of teaching the manifesto in the writing classroom at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, a national conference at which they were among the only undergraduate students, and that their work and the manifesto project were well received by attendees.

In my classes, I hope that my students not only grow intellectually but that they also feel the freedom to learn more about themselves as individuals and social actors. In my nearly 6 years of teaching, I have had multiple students express to me, both in class and privately, that my classroom was a safe space for them. This is one of the most important things a student can convey to me as it means that I am accomplishing my main task: to foster a challenging yet inviting environment that encourages students to inquire, experiment, take risks, and discover new truths about themselves and others through writing.