

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

From (neo)colonialism to gender norms, racism, climate change, and economic inequality, I aim to show students that literature is more relevant than ever to the pressing social problems of our day. To do this I strive to meet students where they are in their learning. At the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois I have been privileged to teach a diverse range of students: first generation students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ students, international students, students of color, and students of privilege. And I have taught students whose intellectual backgrounds span STEM disciplines, the humanities, and the social sciences. For all students, my goal is to make literature as accessible and inclusive as possible. In doing so I encourage students to learn important transferrable skills and to become strong scholars. But I equally insist on literature's distinctive qualities, stressing how literary texts respond to history, offer social insights, and help prepare students for living in a diverse, globally minded world.

Everyone, no matter their major or prior experience, can learn to close read literature and to appreciate the insights it offers about humanity and society. In "Introduction to Fiction," I often begin the semester by asking students to close read Carrie Mae Weems' photograph, "Black Woman with Chicken," and then compare it to a flash fiction attributed to Ernest Hemingway: "For sale: baby shoes. Never worn." My students are eager to begin making observations about Weems' image, and together we discuss what our observations might mean. This early exercise illustrates to students that they already have some of the basic skills of close reading, and that this class will teach them to hone those skills. When we contrast Weems' image with Hemingway's story, we have an opportunity to discuss literature's ability to make interiority and motive – that is, the experiences of others - uniquely accessible. This opening exercise illustrates how I facilitate students' own skills and prior knowledge, while also guiding them to consider new ideas.

Similarly, when I teach students more advanced skills, like how to read academic criticism, I make sure to emphasize their own capacities and help them take charge of their learning. In my interdisciplinary course "Genres of Living on a Damaged Planet," pairs of students analyzed a survey of genre theories by working to comprehend the article's account of an individual thinker's concept of genre; each then reported back to the class about their portion of the article. In this way students broke down a difficult article into manageable pieces, taught each other what they had learned, and assembled a wide-ranging conception of genre that underpinned the rest of the course. Giving students the chance to work together early on also helps them become comfortable with each other while supporting their diverse learning strategies and personalities. For shy students or students from disciplines where class discussion is not emphasized, giving them the opportunity to prepare responses and talk with peers lowers barriers to participation. Most importantly, this kind of exercise helps students see learning as an on-going process that requires collaboration, listening, and a capacity for appreciating different perspectives.

Likewise, when my students workshop their paper drafts with each other in advanced composition courses like "Postcolonial Novels," I give students the opportunity to discuss what helpful writing advice they have received from or given to their peers. In this way students reinforce their own knowledge about writing and are able to collectively come up with a list of writing tips that everyone can draw from. These kinds of activities help make my classrooms a level playing field and give students the opportunity to listen to each other and to see each other as valuable resources.

In "Postcolonial Novels" I also asked students to write weekly discussion board posts in which they posed questions and observations they wanted to think about over the duration of the class; in doing so they created an archive of insights and reflections for themselves which they drew on as they designed their own final research paper topics. In lower level classes I build in similar scaffolding exercises to give students the opportunity to practice writing and in order for me to assess their

progress and provide forward-looking feedback. Thus, one of my primary goals as an instructor is to make literary texts, ideas, and skills as accessible as possible and to help students be active in their own learning. I give students many opportunities to practice new and old skills and encourage them to realize their own capacities to study literature, teach each other, and contribute to shared classroom knowledge.

My classes also help students develop global awareness and cultural competency by exposing them to diverse national, historical, and literary traditions. Global perspectives are foundational to courses like “Postcolonial Literature in English,” which foregrounds non-Western cultural forms and historical experience. But, even in more general classes like “Introduction to Fiction,” we always read women and authors of color; and in my environmental classes, we examine environmental racism and the ways in which environmental writing is inflected by class, race, gender, and geopolitics.

However, I also believe that these kinds of skills flourish best in an environment where the instructor guides and intervenes judiciously in class discussion. This guidance is especially important when reading dense material, or in classes with different majors and levels of college experience. It is also important because my classes often ask students to examine their assumptions about sensitive topics like gender or race. For instance, in “Postcolonial Literature in English,” which draws freshman through seniors, we discuss how race is socially and textually constructed, rather than a natural category. While some students, especially the upperclassmen, readily grasp this idea, many of my freshman students continue to talk about race as equivalent to biological difference. At these moments I first steer them back to the readings to reexamine the arguments put forward about how race is a meaning imposed on biology. I also ask students to think about the consequences of their preexisting notions; if race is fixed to biology, what does biological change or mixture mean for race? And might the idea of biologically fixed race be used for ideological purposes, as in the case of white superiority?

These kinds of questions prompt students to think about the consequences of their tacit assumptions but can also spark resistance as students must first unlearn what they have perceived to be a truth claim. But, to facilitate student learning it is sometimes necessary to denaturalize their prior knowledge, clarify a misinterpretation, or simply repeat an idea that is still new. At times like these I find that my pedagogy must work between helping students be active in their learning, and my responsibility as the instructor to structure the classroom environment and learning objectives, highlight the relevance of diverse ethical or political claims, and insist on the necessity of students’ grappling with the difficulties of a text. This balance is not easy to strike, but it is often part of teaching courses with socially sensitive material.

In this same course, “Postcolonial Literature in English,” we re-encountered the constructedness of race when we read racial slurs in Derek Walcott. Walcott uses the ‘n-word’ in his postcolonial poetry, and one of my students mentioned that she was uncomfortable using the word in class. At this late point in the semester we had learned to trust each other as a community and this student felt able to share her feelings with me and then with the class. Though race was a topic throughout the course, the painful history of the n-word, especially in an American classroom, made the poems a flashpoint for discussing racism’s ongoing legacy, both in postcolonial contexts and the United States. In one of my proudest classroom moments, my students debated how they wanted to approach racial slurs and other hate words. While we never reached total unanimity about racial slurs in literature, we had a candid and considerate discussion about how and when they could be said. This allowed us to continue studying Walcott in a way that was as inclusive, conscientious, and respectful as possible toward each other, the text, and to the difficult issues the text asked us to confront.

In my classes I strive help students think critically, speak and write persuasively, listen actively, and embrace the importance of continuous and collaborative learning. Such skills will help them succeed academically and in their careers. But most of all I aim to help them become thoughtful and generous citizens, prepared to engage with the ever-changing, diverse world around them.