

Zoë Townsend: Teaching Philosophy

I actively move away from the concept of “sink or swim” in academia; the idea that students must simply succeed through sheer force of will. In my experience as a student, there was seemingly an inherent belief that information and “canonical knowledge” was somehow absorbed through osmosis and there was very little room in the classroom for explanation or questions that were considered rudimentary. My desire is to demystify and humanize academia for my students and to never assume nor impose an assumption of knowledge upon them; I consider this mute presumption an act of pedagogical failure. Students are present to learn, not unnecessarily struggle to learn concepts or words that the instructor supposes are sacrosanct. Nothing is assumed in my classroom; I remind my students regularly that nobody knows everything about anything, that teachers and professors are still actively learning themselves, and that no question is unwelcome in any learning context.

This philosophy was enforced during my time instructing College Reading and Intermediate Writing at Northwest Arkansas Community College. These were developmental courses that were designed to equip diverse classrooms with practical tools to succeed in their academic and professional lives. Lessons were marginally theoretical and largely practical. Before teaching students how to draft a thesis statement, I first explicitly taught them what a thesis statement was and how to identify them using hands-on activities in the classroom. In my writing classrooms, we learned how to identify comma splices and where to place colons, but first I taught them what a colon looks like, and we identified examples in text. Both lessons were later reinforced with games (Jenga, memory, charades) that consistently referred to the lesson but were familiar and accessible to the students and so actively engaged them in learning rather than excluded them with theories that tended to obfuscate rather than clarify. I carried this foundation with me into my Composition classrooms at the University of Arkansas, with a vague suspicion that perhaps these types of lessons would feel too elementary to my students. However, rather unsurprisingly, I discovered that these students were no different in many ways; more academically advanced students still benefitted from and enjoyed learning / relearning what a thesis statement was and how to draft them using six explicit steps that they wrote down on white-board cubes in groups. After this activity, they began working on their drafts for a summary assignment, and all of my students drafted strong, compelling thesis statements as a direct result of this activity.

It is imperative to consider, especially in the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, that the students entering English classrooms as new students at colleges or boarding schools are mostly learning, for the first time, how to be a student away from home for the first time. Many of these students spent months if not years of their scholastic careers isolated within their homes. The effect of this on these students simply cannot be underestimated. For this reason, the foundation of my teaching pedagogy is compassion. With compassion, my goal is to teach my students skills that will serve them well not just as writers but as social creatures encountering the wider world. More compassion in the classroom might well lead students who know and value their own worth and that of others, not just higher grades. It is my belief that if our students are more able to be compassionate to themselves

and one another, and in doing so connect more authentically with one another, our students will be more able and likely to succeed in the classroom and beyond. This belief can indeed manifest in effective and pedagogically sound ways in the writing classroom. In one activity, I had my students interview one another before summarizing their findings and sharing them with the rest of the class. This assignment encouraged my students to craft thoughtful questions, to listen well, and then to engage in the practice of summarizing, which was an essential part of the curriculum. Further, in sharing their summaries, the class learns about their classmates *and* allows each student to use their voice in respectful ways on the behalf of a peer.

More recently, I have been the instructor of record for two online courses: *The Bible as Literature*, which taught ways to encounter the Bible as a rich library of literary significance, and *Rethinking Literature*, which focused on science fiction as a means of exploring some of the themes and preoccupations of a society wrestling with anxieties in a fun and non-traditional way. Working with students in these courses was a valuable reminder of my love for teaching literature and the true joy that comes from sharing ideas, offering feedback on critical essays, developing assignments that allowed my students to be creative and reflective, and more than anything, to be in relationship with engaged and curious thinkers and creators. Gaining experience teaching students in an online format also allowed me to hone my abilities as an educator even given the virtual distance and did not deter from my developing authentic and meaningful relationships with my students.