TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Teaching is a core value at UNC Chapel Hill. While completing my doctoral studies, I developed three courses for two universities, co-taught one class, directed three online classes, and assisted with eight courses in three departments. Inspired by the program’s exceptional emphasis on professional and pedagogical development, I dedicated myself to learning as much as I could about the craft of teaching. My approach to teaching focuses on three central commitments: engagement, collaboration, and diversity.

Engagement

I entered a doctoral program eager to discuss my research interests with students, but was surprised to find how much I enjoyed teaching itself. I discovered that even when the subject is not directly relevant to my current research (see appendix B-i), engaging with and challenging students to think critically about important material is incredibly rewarding. My passion for teaching has been the point most frequently noted on my student evaluations throughout five years of teaching (see appendix G).

I also stress students’ active involvement in the class. I encourage active participation by learning students’ names early and by having students’ display name tags on their desks. We joke about the name tags feeling elementary, but employing them allows students to use their classmates’ names early and often – promoting a more engaged and dynamic classroom conversation. I also require all students to meet with me one-on-one before their midterm exam, in order to gauge initial impressions of the class, hear a bit more about students’ educational and personal backgrounds, and get a sense of the diverse personalities at play in my classroom. My students earn participation grades, rather than attendance credit. I encourage contributions from students who are hesitant to speak up; I have students call on each other (facilitated by using name tags); for some sessions, everyone must speak once before anyone speaks twice; in others, students toss a beanbag to each other, taking turns contributing to the discussion (and adding a kinetic element to the conversation). I try to vary class formats: I sometimes have students act out historical or fictional case studies (see appendix C); I often break classes into smaller discussion groups, each focusing on a particular aspect of the assignment; if students are reading sources with conflicting viewpoints, I have them stage debates. I also provide alternate means of earning participation credit: I created a Facebook community for one class and encouraged students to post news and popular media items to foster out-of-class discussions; I also host smaller group events (for example, film discussions and writing or research workshops) outside class meetings. Finally, in my more advanced classes, I require students to lead class discussions; students direct the conversation, while I occasionally step in shift discussion toward lesson objectives.

I battle complacency in the classroom by varying my lesson plans. I prefer to lecture in short segments, for no more than 15 minutes at a time; lecture segments are divided by question sessions and note swapping, wherein students confer about the notes they’ve taken so far. I incorporate multimedia components in my lecture, including examples from popular culture sources (film, music, television, etc.) that instantiate the concepts we’re covering. As I noted above, I encourage participation outside the classroom by employing social networking tools (like Facebook and Twitter) to build a sense of community among students. As I mentioned, I structure class in unconventional ways; I further assign unconventional writing projects (see Appendix D). I further provide on- and off-campus opportunities for the students to engage with class concepts: this past semester, I assigned Angels in America in part because a local theater company was staging the show at the same time.

Collaboration

I firmly believe that effective teaching is a collaborative venture. This includes collaboration with students and with other teachers and educational professionals, as well as encouraging students to collaborate among themselves.
I lay the foundation for instructor-student dialogue with the syllabus: I stress that I grade students on how they think, not what they think. I explain that they earn grades based on how well they articulate their thoughts and positions, how closely they read assigned texts, and how much their ability to think critically and synthetically develops over the course of the semester. I also encourage students to provide initial feedback in our pre-midterm meetings; I further request midterm evaluations and respond to those comments the following class session. I solicit student opinions in designing class assignments: if students are struggling with certain material, I try to review the reading more carefully, rather than strictly adhering to a set schedule.

My collaboration with students also requires mutual accountability and clarity about expectations. I expect strict adherence to deadlines, but also guarantee that students will receive their graded work back before the next assignment is due. I insist that written and verbal communication be professional and respectful; likewise, I strive to treat my students with respect. To facilitate dialogue, I encourage students speaking in class to draw on their own experiences, and to assume other students operate from their best intentions. I make my expectations about assignments as clear as possible: I require my students to complete a tutorial on plagiarism before they submit written work, which studies suggest reduces incidents of plagiarism.\(^1\) I provide detailed instructions and rubrics for all assignments, so that students know what I expect from their work (see Appendix D). I also facilitate exam reviews for my introductory classes and writing workshops for all classes with a writing component, so that students feel well prepared to submit their work.

I encourage students to collaborate with each other as well. As I noted above, my advanced students lead class discussions; I usually try to pair discussion leaders, to encourage students to plan their classes with a colleague. I often assign roles during in-class small group activities, so that students contribute different elements to discussions. I encourage students to build community beyond the class through social networking and to provide peer feedback on written assignments. Many students also form teams to compete in exam review games, which further builds community and fosters student collaboration during exam preparation.

Collaboration with other teachers and educational professionals has also played a key role in my pedagogical development. During my second year at UNC, I met weekly with a consultant for the Center for Faculty Excellence to expand my skill set. My consultant proposed a number of effective approaches, including the incorporation of visual, audio, and kinetic elements into my lessons. I was selected to participate in the Center for Faculty Excellence’s Future Faculty Fellowship Program, a week-long intensive session that facilitates interdisciplinary conversation on approaches to undergraduate teaching. My interactions with doctoral candidates in UNC’s English Department, whose training included a rigorous peer review program, led me to create and institute a graduate student-led Teaching Committee in my own department. Now in its second year, this six-person committee plans pedagogy workshops, offers peer observation and feedback, and leads an orientation session for new teaching assistants each fall. Our graduate students also exchange syllabi, lesson plans, and activity ideas both in person and through our departmental wiki, which I maintain.

**Diversity**

I am committed to acknowledging diversity and challenging privilege in my teaching. For me, this begins contextually: I try to take my students’ geographical and educational backgrounds into account when I formulate approaches to new material. That is: I taught religious history very differently at North Carolina State University, an institution largely focused on science and engineering, than I did at UNC, which places far more emphasis on the humanities. My syllabi include considerations for different levels of physical and learning abilities and gender/sexuality identifications, as well as lessons which trouble economic, racial, gendered/sexual, educational,

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\(^1\) See, for example: Jacob and Dee, “Rational Ignorance in Education: A Field Experiment in Student Plagiarism” (2010)

religious, and geographic privilege. To illustrate: my class on American religious history did not prioritize mainstream traditions over marginal ones; my class on the history of Christian traditions adopted a global approach, so as not to privilege a western Christian lineage.

My teaching, like my research, is multidisciplinary: my advanced students employ historical, literary critical, theoretical, and ethnographic methodologies at different points in their semester (see Appendix B, p. 17). I also sought out opportunities to teach in areas other than Religious Studies: thus I assisted with classes in UNC’s History and Women’s Studies departments. I further assign a wide range of source material whenever possible: my students often read sermons, plays, novels, poetry, material culture (archaeological evidence), sacred texts, political declarations, theological treatises during the course of a single semester.

Finally, acknowledging diversity in a religious studies classroom has required me to navigate conflicts of identities and convictions. I teach about things excluded from polite conversation: religion and sex. My students often struggle with conflicts they perceive between my instructions (i.e. this is an academic conversation) and identity imperatives (e.g. religious and/or sexual identities). I often have Christian students uncomfortable with considering the Hebrew bible as a historical document, or queer students reluctant to think about the cultural construction of their sexual identities. I try to explain that the academic study of religion often requires us to bracket our personal convictions, so that we can engage with texts or concepts in new ways. I insist on this academic approach while trying to respect my students’ backgrounds. I model inclusive language about religious traditions (e.g. Christianities) and language for the divine (e.g. Godself, rather than gendered pronouns for god/s). I stress that I am not trying to change my students’ beliefs: I am merely trying to demonstrate that we can—in fact, we must—think closely and expansively about the subjects that mean the most to us.

These three objectives—engagement, collaboration, and diversity—inform my teaching. To encourage young adults in thinking deeply and broadly about difficult material is, I feel, both a great privilege and a grave responsibility. I consider teaching an invaluable opportunity to foster critical thinking skills at a crucial juncture in my students’ lives. Thus teaching, as an ongoing enterprise in challenging both myself and my students, is of paramount importance to my scholarly endeavors.