**Educational Philosophy**

For over half a decade as a Graduate Teaching Fellow in the English Department at Queens College, I was fortunate enough to teach a number of different classes, from basic composition to writing-intensive surveys of literature and literary theory to senior-level seminars of my own design. Working in the largest and most diverse urban public system in the country, I have had the opportunity to instruct a vast range of students, differing considerably in terms of race, class, ethnicity, religion, English-language acquisition, and general level of academic preparation. Through this variety of both student body and course content, I have been able to collect, develop, assess and refine a “best practices” of sorts. And I have come to believe that effective learning happens best when applying a number of techniques emerging from the digital humanities, and then linking these with clear scaffolded assignments, a shared academic vocabulary, vast time and attention paid to student writing, a special emphasis on the structure and strategies of argumentation, and a rigor brought to contextualizing all readings, concepts and assignments.

I foreground the digital humanities because it was through this experience that my teaching philosophy was formed. In 2006, I was asked to participate in a pilot program at Queens College designed to teach academic writing entirely in this mode. Devised by the Director of Composition at the time, Dr. [NAME] (now a professor of new media at the University of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_), I was first tasked to research and design a curriculum that reflected the cultural and academic changes wrought by both the Internet and the ubiquity of digital devices, and then teach a number of these new sections of “cyber-comp.” While all the traditional essay forms remained (my students produced analyses, summaries, comparisons, abstracts, personal pieces and research papers), the entirety of the work aside from in-class writing was “turned in” online, and the inclusion of digital objects (images, music, short films, etc.) became part of the assignments. Obviously, the ethos behind this approach was not in the service of producing research papers bearing all the dreaded grammatical hallmarks of a text message, but, rather, to demystify and define the process of “communication through writing” as an action our students commit countless times a day. The response in my classes was immediate: A near-100% homework completion rate, higher attendance, and an obvious increase in enthusiasm and engagement during discussions. The research projects my students completed ranged from the witty (one had the distinctive opening bars of Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir” begin to play when I clicked on his blog post about the conflict) to the profound (in an argumentative piece about Israeli settlement agreements, another student included video clips of interviews she conducted with both Israeli Jews and Palestinians while on a family trip to Jerusalem during spring break). My ESL/ELL students seemed to benefit most of all, expressing themselves first through the more familiar languages of image, music and film, and then translating this demonstrated confidence into successful prose. What’s more – and perhaps most important for the publicly funded institution where this work was done – all of this was possible with very little additional cost through various free online platforms.

In class, I use these techniques to enable my students to recognize themselves as active participants within their new-media culture rather than passive consumers. For instance, as a low-stakes writing assignment, we read a number of news stories from the *New York Times* on the SMART Board and discussed the conventions of journalistic discourse. I then had them take out the first-person personal essay they wrote for homework, and rewrite the piece as a newspaper story. The results were certainly entertaining, but they also highlighted the discursive qualities of journalistic prose in an immediate and provocative fashion, and allowed us to discuss such important writing concepts as genre, authority, and audience. During the next session, I showed a YouTube video of Jon Stewart and Tucker Carlson battling it out on *Crossfire*, and asked my students to analyze the banter in order to list all the major political issues disguised as good-natured barbs. Through this assignment my students not only performed a close reading of a digital “text” that would prepare them for more sustained readings of longer works, but they also gathered a number of possible topics for their research projects. These topics were then discussed as a class, resulting in a number of debate-style blog posts. The students finally selected one position of a popular political issue and argued this claim in a thesis-driven argumentative essay (complete with audio and video) that was then subjected once again to a class-wide peer review in the form of a debate.

These innovations have also heavily influenced my approach to the teaching of literature as well. For example, in an upper-division course I developed around the Russian Revolution and its representation in American literature, my students were given an assignment that took advantage of a number of online archives of “little magazines” from the early twentieth century. By examining these documents in a format nearly identical to the originals, my students were able to focus on a number of questions and contexts impossible to assess through anthologies and readers, and they were also able to harness their native facility for online research toward particular learning outcomes. Posting their research to the online discussion board, I then had the students engage in a lively online debate concerning the importance of placing American political movements into their historical context. I was as impressed with the sophistication of their arguments as I was with the fact that these exchanges occurred well after the formal end of class. Being able to share images, music and reproductions of original documents allowed my students a much broader understanding of an era that seemed to be impossibly locked in the past. This focus on contextualization helped them to understand that their present moment was also merely an instant in time, and one always in the midst of transformation.

As implied above, if I have one desire for all of my classes (beyond achieving a familiarity with the subject directly at hand), it is for my students to be able to interrogate their own “common sense” – not necessarily in the service of challenging orthodoxies, but rather to understand that all beliefs carry with them a history that should never be taken for granted. For instance, one of the first low-stakes writing assignments in my composition classes is for my students to choose one common belief or behavior from their religion, ethnicity, or culture that has always confused them. After a discussion wherein we refine the topic itself, my students then embark on a small research project with the aim of historicizing their subject, and then to present their findings to the class, often with the aid of relevant images, video, and sound. In this way, the students not only confront the contingency of their own beliefs, but also share the history and contemporary meaning of these personal aspects with the entire class, fostering both inquiry and understanding.

Teaching, however, in my opinion extends far beyond the classroom – and necessarily into institutional development as well. I think it is crucial not only to perform admirably and generously while in class, but also to foster the creation of new curricular and departmental structures that promote stronger educational experiences in general. This belief was only strengthened after I was invited by the Composition Policy Committee and [NAME], the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, to participate in an ambitious new project that aimed to integrate college writing more fully into the general-education curriculum. Based on the Princeton Writing Program, the project intended to initiate a conversation about writing that extended beyond disciplinary lines by linking topics-based sections of composition with corresponding courses in other departments, providing a thematic link between the two, and collapsing yet another boundary that relegated writing to something students do “only in comp.” Through this project, I was also exposed to a number of works by composition theorists, such as Kerry Walk’s *Teaching With Writing*, John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* , and Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay” – all of which radically simplified and clarified my approach to assignment development as well as grading. I now always make sure each assignment I give contains a single “action” sentence that sums up the entirety of the activity. I also employ minimal marking, usually targeting “lower order concerns” only in the first paragraph, and continue reading with an eye toward Mina Shaugnessy’s contention that student work often contains powerful ideas that are dogged by their difficulties with writing. As I continue teaching, I look forward to many more opportunities to combine my interests in the myriad approaches discussed above in the service of promoting an engaging and student-centered classroom.