Teaching Philosophy

As a composition instructor at a culturally diverse four-year school with a non-traditional student body, I strive to teach practical skills that will not only assist students in their careers but encourage them to be informed and thoughtful civilians. My lessons center on critical thinking and on the grammatical and stylistic norms that govern professional communication.

My teaching philosophy has shifted in the seven years since I began teaching composition. Originally, I taught “writing as product,” to use Erica Lindemann’s phrase, with focus on imitation of traditional writing styles. After taking a graduate-level course, Composition Pedagogy, while earning my PhD, I realized that, as technology has influenced changes in the norms of communication, the language and strict grammar of the academy does not hold the same significance in the workplace. Auto-correct in smart phones and word processors has rendered spelling memorization less important, for example. Furthermore, because social media applications make multi-modal forms of communication broadly accessible, professionals not only write cover letters and proposals, but they also promote themselves on platforms that require efficiency, like Twitter, and they present themselves to prospective employers and clients through visual rhetoric on Snapchat, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The written communication skills needed for career readiness are clarity, brevity, and tone, which I teach primarily through study of rhetorical situation. I likewise teach vocabulary by assigning excellent scholarly models as weekly readings. In my Fall 2017 Atlanta Studies Composition II course, I paired public discourse theory, such as Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Warner’s “counterpublics,” with popular readings about Atlanta, to encourage students to consider how region and identity intersect while also observing the variations in sentence length and language between these very different sources.

Because visual rhetoric has become so important for career readiness, I am increasingly using multimedia. In my Fall 2016 Composition I course, I introduced my first digital humanities assignment. I invited students to examine the conventions of Instragram, tumblr, and personal blogs and to create their own social media accounts. This assignment gave students greater critical awareness of how social media icons publicize themselves and attract a following. It also allowed students with strength in marketing and design but weakness in traditional writing the chance to excel and to explore their talents and interests. Likewise, since the assignment focused on self-promotion, it appealed to all students, regardless of their particular major. I feel that making Composition interesting and relevant for non-humanities majors is vital, and as social media has become a major factor in professional hiring processes, critical awareness of one’s digital presence will prove valuable to undergraduates in all disciplines.

My pedagogy has also become more multimodal. I have long been interested in place-based learning and I consider multimodal teaching an effective method to meet the learning needs of a diverse classroom. In my Atlanta Studies Composition I course, students examine maps, archived videos, historical photos, city planning department archives, and newspapers alongside traditional scholarly articles, thereby providing an avenue for visual and audio-visual learners to absorb lessons effectively and allowing all students to see how scholars use primary materials to construct their texts. The final project for the course, a research paper, calls on students to examine an Atlanta-specific issue of their choice in any discipline. In addition to using scholarly sources for their research, students conduct primary research and learn how to use digital resources, including the Georgia Archives Virtual Vault, Census data, and mapping programs, such as ATLmaps. Several also learn how to conduct interviews. Many students feel personally vested in their projects and they routinely produce fantastic work.

More recently, my place-based pedagogy has been incorporated into a pilot program that seeks to deepen student engagement and further strengthen students’ career readiness. Beginning in Fall 2019, my Atlanta Studies courses have been intentionally paired with similar courses in other disciplines, and I have worked with the faculty in the History and Political Science departments to develop complementary courses and assignments that encourage students to see connections between their classes. Through this program, I have also begun to supervise an extra-curricular Project Lab, where a team of students is researching the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot in order to create a walking tour available on a mobile app. This project not only helps them learn utilization of new technologies, such as mapping software, and develop career-readiness skills, such as reporting, team leadership, and writing for public audiences, it further allows these students to point to a completed product that they can include in their portfolios when in the job market. This direct supervision also gives them the opportunity to work closely with a professor – an opportunity not ordinarily available to many students at the undergraduate level.

I am determined to be an approachable instructor that my students understand and trust. While other instructors choose to maintain a significant distance between themselves and their students in hopes of protecting their superiority and control of the class, I opt for a more informal setting that permits frank discussion and encourages students to be more receptive to my suggestions. Because they understand that I can relate to their experiences as undergraduate students, they appreciate that my advice in class is applicable to their lives and accept it for its practicality. One way that I maintain this openness is by presenting samples of my own undergraduate papers, including unsuccessful examples of my writing. Not only do I allow students to see my interests and the development of my writing style, I point out the errors that I made to illustrate where I should have revised more carefully. In turn, they feel less self-conscious about their errors and they recognize that despite the flaws in my writing at the beginning of my college career, I have managed to improve my technique sufficiently enough to become a composition teacher.

Finally, I engage students by assigning course readings and papers that reflect the diversity of interests presented in a multi-disciplinary classroom. In Fall 2014, I introduced a themed unit on Bonnie and Clyde, which I expanded into a full composition course in Fall 2016. This topic has broad appeal, both because of its sensationalism and because the course utilizes multimodal learning. Students examine visual, audio-visual, and written rhetoric by comparing photographs of the couple with modern-day music videos about them, by contrasting personal narratives of their affiliates with contemporary police records, and by comparing scholarly articles with newspaper and magazine accounts. The cumulative assignment is a research paper in which students examine how public memory is influenced by media. Students have always responded positively to this course, as they feel inspired by my personal enthusiasm for and knowledge of the topic and are fascinated by the tremendous variation in the many depictions of the notorious couple that claim to be accurate. Like my Atlanta Studies course, my Bonnie and Clyde course successfully engages student interest, incorporates multiple media, and fosters critical thinking.