

Thinking about pedagogy in terms of positionality: a teaching philosophy

My approach to teaching is anchored in my own experience learning to express myself in a language that is not my mother tongue. Expressing oneself, particularly in a different language, requires leaving comfort zones, making relatable references, and searching for comprehension cues. When we think about teaching and learning as this common search to understand and be understood, we can deconstruct hierarchies and decentralize who provides knowledge and where that knowledge comes from. And to me, this idea that everyone's role in the classroom can shift intermittently between learner and contributor creates the most meaningful learning moments. One concrete way to think about how my experience informs my teaching philosophy is through my consciousness of positionality, which I wish to develop here in terms of space and perspective.

SPACE - The way that we occupy and move about in a classroom – both conventional and virtual – can facilitate flexibility in roles and mindsets. In the physical classroom, my students always sit in a formation where they can see and hear each other, and the displacement of bodies (including my own) is incorporated into everyday activities. One of my favorite activities to do in discussion-based courses is to hold “silent discussions,” where I write questions pertaining to a text or theme on poster paper and pin them around the room. Students circulate and write their responses individually, but still manage to respond or react to one another through arrows, exclamations, emojis. Such activities successfully create a fluid idea of the classroom so that when we must shift to distance learning, we can easily adapt. For example, instead of moving around the room, my writing-intensive advanced French class was able to carry productive discussions on an online platform called Padlet. Students write and ‘like’ comments and are still able to react to one another in real-time. This alternative form of discussion stimulates creative thinking and serves as a brainstorming tool for subsequent essays. These are also the activities my students find memorable and praise most often in my evaluations because the opportunity to circulate and discuss with different classmates, or the freedom to write on a shared board gives them ownership over their learning process.

PERSPECTIVE - Being a first-generation scholar of color, I genuinely want to understand where each student comes from, whether that is a place, community, or experience. At the beginning of the semester, I meet with my students in groups to gauge their interests and learning styles to be able to adapt my materials accordingly. Because some students will be better visual learners than they are listeners, some better at grammar than at vocabulary, my class sessions vary in style to invite more participation. In my selection of materials, whether that is songs for a beginning French class, or literature and film for a more advanced seminar, I am conscious of the inclusion of different media because I believe that only in modeling this openness in the course material can students then feel invited to share their own diverse perspectives. I am careful to make the classroom a safe, but also productive space where what we share can have discursive value. That is, while personal experience can be effective springboards for dialogue, I urge my students to focus less on what they feel, than on what it is that provokes the sentiment. In literature, this grounds students in the material, to arrive at evidence-based conclusions, but also allows them to employ their feelings as important heuristics rather than dismissing them as irrational contributions.

Cultivating a critical perspective even on sensitive issues such as immigration, economic disparity, or language inclusion, based on a process of recognizing one's physical and intellectual positionality is, to me, a fundamental asset of a humanities education. In an age of fast and continuous access to information, my philosophy as a teacher-scholar is thus to challenge my students to slow down and evaluate our position, because only then can we seek to understand and be understood.