

## Students as Critical Actors: A Teaching Philosophy

“How does your argument change the world?”

When faced with this question in my intermediate writing courses, my students freeze. For several weeks, we have been inquiring into the efficacy of language and the ways in which writing and rhetorical practices perform cultural work. We have been reading about the rhetorical dimensions of texts involving writer, audience and purpose; we have been exploring and playing with different genres of writing, from the cover letter, to the research paper, to the grant proposal; and we have been analyzing the ways different mediums, such as digital writing, present new and challenging rhetorical tasks. I pose this question midway through the semester, when my students are engaged in a generative writing exercise about a possible topic for their grant proposal assignment. I break this question down, encouraging them to think about how their own writing serves as a form of action, prompting various kinds of social change. We talk about change on both micro and macro levels: how a tweet might circulate so widely that it becomes the subject of a news story, or how an essay might reshape the way readers view a certain topic, or how a grant proposal may critically intervene in a public issue. My students feel empowered at the thought of impacting public life through their writing. They begin to see and reflect on the value in the texts they produce. They go back to their generative writing exercises with a greater sense of agency and rhetorical vigor.

These moments of inquiry and reflection are central to my teaching philosophy. In all of my courses, my goal in the classroom is to help students question how writing and rhetoric work in the world—how texts get produced, move, and affect change across various contexts and borders, and how they as writers participate in that change. In combining traditional concepts of rhetoric (such as purpose and audience) with contemporary investigations of culture, gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationalism, I take an intersectional approach to helping students think, write, and communicate with the knowledge that their actions are not isolated to one particular place or nation. Through their writing, I strive to help my students understand their own positions within a global information economy, to help them gain a greater sense of local and global citizenship, and to help them see themselves as agents who create, circulate, and consume texts. For example, in my professional writing courses, as well as my courses on “Tutoring Writing,” I help students consider how in the “real world” they encounter cross-cultural and cross-national situations that necessitate a critical understanding of language, writing, and textual production within a transnational context. In my practicum for writing center tutors, my unit on “Rethinking Differences” asks students to read such essays as Min-Zahn Lu’s “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone” and excerpts from Krista Ratcliff’s *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* to help them further consider the cross-cultural aspects of literacy practices. Following these readings, students engage in an assignment called “From Snapshots to Inquiry,” where they consider and analyze the cultural, social, political, and (trans)national factors influencing their own literacy experiences and identities.

Informed by my interests in feminist and transnational studies, my pedagogy encourages students to build on the rhetorical and linguistic repertoires they bring to the classroom and to inquire into their own rhetorical awareness and engagement as critical actors and writers, both within and beyond the university’s walls. In my first year writing courses, we consider the links between writing and global citizenship through the concepts of rhetorical production and rhetorical adaptivity. In my unit “Adding to the Conversation: Digital Rhetoric and Public Discourse,” I ask students to consider the effects of public discourse within digital spaces. As a class, we look at several blogs (e.g. *Gender Across Borders*, *The Angry Black Woman*, and *This Blog is Queer*), analyzing the rhetorical strategies and visual appeals on each site. We examine the rhetorical choices behind the design, methods of circulation, structure of

the site, requirements for participation, and processes of textual production/consumption (who is the writer(s), who is the intended audience?). Following a collaborative discussion about what constitutes democratic public discourse within these particular sites, students then participate in a blog of their choice (or they create one) and reflect on their experiences engaging in civic discourse online. This kind of assignment helps students gain a better understanding of the relationship between rhetorical context, audience, and purpose within spaces such as the web. In my literature and gender courses, notions of rhetorical production and adaptivity play a role in helping students examine texts as sites of cultural work and knowledge production. In my course “Gender, Sexuality, Literature and Culture: Transnational Circuits of Knowledge Production,” we read both non-fictional and fictional texts from various parts of the world, interrogating how knowledge about gender, sexuality, and culture gets produced and circulated through rhetorical appeals and textual representations. For example, in reading Zoe Wicomb’s “Ash on My Sleeve,” we discuss the historical context of South Africa under apartheid in relation to the essay’s themes of gender, racial identity, and nationalism. In groups, students discuss and present on the rhetorical devices used by the author to illustrate the emergence of these themes (e.g. Wicomb’s overuse of the words “here” and “there” in relation to themes of displacement and transnationalism, or Wicomb’s use of domestic spaces in relation to the construction of gender roles). This kind of activity allows students to trace and hone in on the ways in which language and rhetoric contribute to producing and negotiating social roles and relations.

Encouraging students to see themselves as creators, circulators, and readers of texts undergirds many of my pedagogical aims. In my courses on digital writing, rhetorical theory, and web design, I take a multimodal approach to writing, encouraging students to experiment with an array of writing technologies. Using a variety of digital programs, students question and learn how texts can be remixed and revised for various rhetorical purposes—how a traditional essay can become a dynamic YouTube video or musical mash-up. I also use digital pedagogies to demonstrate the connections between theory and practice. In my course “Digital Rhetorics and Web Design,” students reflect on the rhetorical effects of certain web genres: how writers use certain genres and platforms to achieve their rhetorical goals. Following these inquiries, students put their knowledge into practice by designing a proto-site for a nonprofit organization of their choice (in addition to designing personal online portfolios). This assignment not only allows students to put the knowledge they have gained about digital rhetoric and design to task, it also enables them to see themselves as critical actors who can affect change through their own literacy practices.

My six years of teaching have also led me to see how the writing classroom can often serve as a space where fraught issues come to the surface and where difficult conversations emerge. Having taught at a large university with a diverse population of students, I have encountered difficult moments as a teacher, such as when our campus faced racist acts of vandalism during the height of the Ferguson protests and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. By facilitating open discussions and low-stakes writing about these issues, I listened attentively and responded to my students’ concerns and feelings. It is moments like these, I believe, that allow teachers to link theory with practice, to bring together the notion of writing as a form of action with real-life circumstances.

With each and every course, it is my hope that students walk away from my classroom feeling like the skills they learned in class—whether they involved gaining proficiency in Dreamweaver, writing a grant proposal for a nonprofit organization, or learning to analyze a text from a transnational perspective—have value and significance beyond the university. It is also my responsibility to help students cultivate these values and understand their own contexts and histories so that they can become better readers, writers, and thinkers, and thus better informed citizens and critical actors in a globalized world.