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Teaching Philosophy

“Why do I need to know this?”

Having taught a few years’ worth of early-morning introductory literature and writing seminars here at UCLA, I can appreciate that “why do I need to know this?” might be met easily with an uninspired answer: “for a requirement.” At the same time, I enjoy the challenge of motivating students to see beyond the litany of requirements they must fulfill in order to graduate. To answer such a challenge, I practice an active pedagogy that alternates conventional paper assignments with tasks that foster student creativity, group work, and opportunities for frequent feedback. My active pedagogy has been rewarded by high student participation rates and constant engagement in class.

When I taught “English 4W: Critical Reading and Writing,” a course generally required for new UCLA students, I ended the quarter by assigning students to interpret, write, and perform scenes from any of the texts we had read. I consider it one of the great achievements of my teaching career that for two straight quarters here at UCLA, students arrived at my 8:00am classes in full costume. Students also came up with creative and rigorous ideas. One group, for instance, wrote a *telenovela* version of a dialogue between Cordelia and her father in *King Lear*. With a thoughtful nod to Elizabethan performance history, a male student played Cordelia, purchasing a large blonde wig for the occasion. Another group rewrote a Pump Room ball scene from *Northanger Abbey* in the style of a high school television drama. Although students also turned in a conventional final paper, I believe that the enduring memories of the course will be their collaboration on this performance assignment.

I strongly believe that by motivating students to take command of their own classroom activity, I can train them to enjoy being critical interpreters and communicators. Amid waning funding for liberal arts departments, decline in enrollment in the humanities, and the rise of for-profit colleges, I hope to serve as an ambassador for the joys of humanities research. I believe that our current college students will have to be the future advocates of the liberal arts education; as such, I strive to make their experiences in my classrooms valuable and relevant in order to merit their advocacy. This vision motivates my own commitment every quarter to modeling what it means to be a critical reader and a clear communicator.

Teaching undergraduate writing has been an opportunity to see firsthand how rousing student interest can motivate better writing. I most recently taught an English 3 class, UCLA’s main-line first-year composition course. I assigned two main papers: the first challenged them to look critically at the construction of gender identity in television advertisements, and the second required that they analyze the perpetuation of racial stereotypes (like the myth of the noble savage) in contemporary popular films. In one of the final class discussions of the term, one student told the class that she can no longer watch advertisements passively. She said, “I have become the most annoying person watching these ads: I start to deconstruct every ad I see and my roommates have told me

they can't watch T.V. with me any more." Another student agreed, saying that, "This class has changed how I see everything. Like Disney is ruined for me. Aladdin is racist. Pocahontas is racist. I can't believe I just absorbed these movies without thinking about these issues before." The discussion became about how all of a sudden, media the students had consumed "passively" before now became an opportunity for a critical examination of how race and gender tropes repeat themselves ad nauseam. One student accused me of the following: "You have ruined my enjoyment of movies and T.V. forever."

I cannot help but feel proud of "ruining" students' passive enjoyment of media because it means that I helped train them to be literate, skeptical, and credible witnesses to sundry social, cultural, and academic events. This critical view raises the stakes for students' writing because it makes clear communication matter. The answer to "Why do I need to know this?" might be, "to ask important questions." I want my students to leave my classroom knowing how to ask important questions, to read texts and media critically, and to express their analyses and interpretations in such a way that their voices can be heard and respected.