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Teaching Philosophy

It seems to me that real intellectual growth comes when we see that interesting questions lead to more interesting questions, in a never-ending process of deepening understanding. The job of a good teacher is to make things more complicated for her students, and then to show them how we may approach the paths through that density.

I strongly believe that students' minds are enriched when their fundamental premises and habits are tested and questioned, so that every intellectual encounter has the potential to be disturbing in the best possible sense. I very much enjoy playing devil's advocate, provoking thought and reactions from students. Thinking for oneself, and judging clearly and critically, is not nurtured by unending praise or indiscriminate agreement. What I demand is that students intelligently defend their responses to materials and issues, and I don't accept a free-for-all in which "everyone has an opinion" without critical thinking.

My teaching philosophy is that good teaching starts with showing students why they should be in that classroom; they should know all the way through the course what is at stake in addressing the subject at hand, why it is important. My own intense curiosity and passion for knowledge, both general and specialized, model for them what I call in the classroom "intellectual fun." By this I mean that the larger point of what we're doing, no matter what the immediate subject, is finding the world a fascinating place, and exploring it by means of texts, discussion, and writing.

Because undergraduates are generally young and inexperienced, texts often seem dismayingly abstract to them. I try to bridge that gap between what they experience and what they read by connecting the texts to their own lives. In a class on Jane Austen, I might ask whether self-deception is benign or destructive in their own social observations or experience; when studying Nietzsche (in the Honors first year foundational course), I ask them to write on hypothetical situations in which they must decide if they truly value truth at the expense of happiness; in my Levermore Global Scholars seminar, Issues in Identity, students are assigned a three-part project in which they interview peers and then an older generation about the meaning of six identity categories in their lives, then asked to put that together with their own evaluations and the texts we read.

However, this connection to personal life can be too soft and unfocused if it is not also illuminated as part of a larger picture. While the understanding we seek is ultimately *about* the effect on the students themselves, it most definitely is not *all* about them; that understanding is only a microcosm of an entire world out there, our modern world and its historical antecedents. I rarely hold a class, whether in Identity, The Victorians, or Women's Literature, in which I don't refer to current trends, ideas, or events in that day's newspaper, so students can develop a sense of the bridge between themselves and the world around them, with our texts as the means to that end. Wherever possible, I have them search the New York Times for articles that pertain to the subject at hand and write

about the connection. My goal is that by the end of our time together, they will receive a fresh or different framework for evaluating their own world, no matter how old the texts we explore.

New instructional technologies have helped me enormously, especially in classes where controversial issues arise from the material. In *Modern Condition*, for example, I have used Blackboard extensively to foster the students' ability to ask questions and challenge each other. Students are each assigned a week in which they must come up with questions arising from class discussions, which the rest of the class must answer, often debating each other. I always participate fully in these discussions by replying to them every day, evaluating their responses, filling gaps in their knowledge, and modeling how to answer in depth. In other classes, however, there is no substitute for good old-fashioned archival work; for example, in my *Victorians* class, I have the students work with librarians to do original research in the nineteenth century popular magazines in our Special Collections. Working with these archival texts in their original form, students enhance their cultural understanding of the formal classroom texts by investigating topics that are as diverse as women's status, the image of childhood, attitudes toward science, or views of colonial enterprise.

Both my teaching and research are unusually interdisciplinary, as I have wide-ranging intellectual interests, and I believe this is highly beneficial to students who are used to compartmentalizing knowledge into "departments". I always strive to show them that literature never appears in a vacuum and therefore should not be explained in one either, as sufficient unto itself. I wish there were more opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching at Adelphi; the three times I co-taught with instructors from other fields in my twenty years here (all long ago in the Honors College) were peak experiences for me, as well as for my students.

The experience of thinking on my feet and sharing my passion for literature and ideas is what keeps me – and my research – alive. As long as I am at Adelphi, I intend to remain active in teaching, in curriculum, and in service to students, because I ought to, because it is part of my commitment to my profession, but most of all, because it is intellectual pleasure in the broadest sense, and I want to give the students all I have.