

Teaching Philosophy | Calvin Olsen

My purpose as an educator is to guide students as they develop skills that transfer to any context they may encounter in their future, be it professional, academic, or personal. In light of that purpose, my main teaching objectives are (1) to help students develop increased self-awareness of their individual talents and limitations, and (2) to construct an environment where students develop the ability to synthesize information of all types. I have many other goals in teaching, but I find that a course based on these principles prepares students to continue a trajectory of learning in and after the courses I teach.

Helping a student identify their current strengths and weaknesses is, in my opinion, the most universally transferable skill I can offer. The first assignment I give my students in every class is write a self-evaluation. Composing a full single-spaced page on this subject with limited guidance is daunting for many students, and that is the point. I provide some structure, but I want students to push themselves to (1) generate multiple examples of strengths and weaknesses, (2) expound on those examples in detail, and (3) provide specific examples from past assignments and writing experiences to illustrate their points. Once students turn in the self-evaluation, I split them into small groups do discuss their strengths and weaknesses, followed up by a class discussion. This exercise gives me a baseline document against which to measure each student's progress over the semester, and students learn that they are not alone in their talents and struggles. Self-evaluation sets the stage for self-awareness.

The original self-evaluation assignment also helps recognize the value of synthesizing information. I believe students should experience the value of combining sources of information and modes of presentation, which facilitates comprehension of the manners in which particular combinations influence audiences (rhetoric, in other words). Along those lines, I supplement my instruction and in-class exercises with student presentations, guest speakers, and, whenever feasible, a field trip. Synthesis of information is built into these activities: during presentations I ask students to analyze the visual rhetoric of their peers' presentation materials, with everything from typography to color palettes coming under scrutiny; guest speakers provide a break from hearing me and allow students to ask questions of professionals who are putting classroom principles into practice; and field trips (particularly those to performances, art galleries, and deliberately designed cultural spaces) allow students to concretize and engage with the concepts we cover in class in new and unfamiliar contexts. These and other multimodal assignments provide a change of scenery and pace, giving students out-of-classroom experience and information to synthesize in later work. Regardless of whether they're learning to write for academic, creative, or professional audiences, students receive stimulus, see their texts put in motion, and learn to see (and, ideally, see through) the persuasive power of writing in the world.

Underlying all of my writing and communication pedagogy is a desire to allow students to be and become as autonomous as possible. My ideal role as an instructor is not that of a traditional "teacher" who simply hands over knowledge and encourages practice; rather, I offer structure, motivation, support, perspective, and feedback as students engage with course projects and each other. While the organization that drives higher education requires me to take on the role of the judge at the end of the semester, my main focus is on empowering my students to make decisions about their scholarship. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory as championed by Edward L.

Deci and Richard M. Ryan at the University of Rochester, I seek to give students control over a large amount of the learning process so they can develop intrinsic motivation for the reading and writing that is so integral to their learning. Coupled with the autonomy I find so valuable to my pedagogy, I also believe in the principle of interactive, experiential learning: students do not work in a vacuum outside of class, so there is no reason for every assignment to be an individual endeavor. Using a process-based approach to writing, I strive to teach students to generate and deliver constructive criticism for their own work and that of their peers. I try very hard to maintain a transparency in my teaching so students may understand the pedagogical reasoning behind my methods, and while the responsibility to learn is ultimately on them I know I am successful when, in the mind of my students, the class grows beyond a means to a grade.

I hold myself to the same standard of self-awareness and development my students encounter in my classroom, so I seek to evolve the content and approach of a course every time I have the chance to re-teach it. I began doing this as an adjunct faculty member at Boston University where I taught a composition course titled “Insanity in Literature” for three years. During my first semester as the instructor of record, Insanity in Lit was a relatively basic writing-about-literature course that compared arguably-insane narrators in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. As I gained teaching experience, the course evolved in turn. Before long, students were examining historical portrayals of insanity in literature and film, analyzing and educating others about ableist language, and classifying and diagnosing the ailments of narrators and other characters using the DSM-5. These topics and texts provided students multiple opportunities to synthesize principles from classroom instruction with “real world” artifacts, resulting in a stronger ability to apply those principles far beyond the few weeks they spend in my course. I continue this habit of upping the ante on course activities in my current position as an instructor of record in NC State’s first year writing program. This semester (my second), I have added a visual rhetorical analysis to the social science unit project, and over the summer I will be developing a digital humanities project to implement as a final assignment in the semesters that come. These two assignments mirror the new research interests I have developed in my first year at NC State, and I look forward to tinkering with these assignments for optimization as interesting and effective pedagogical tools.

In order to continue growing as an educator and course developer, I actively seek out professional development workshops here at NC State. I am currently working toward the Graduate Certificate in Digital Humanities and the Teaching and Communication Certificate, which have led me to participate in workshops and courses such as “Accessibility in the Classroom”, “Libraries Support for Instructors and Students”, and even “How to Avoid Death by PowerPoint”. Coupled with the existing professional development opportunities provided by the programs in which I study and teach—professional development colloquia, courses on course development, faculty observations, etc.—I have curated a program of personal and pedagogical growth built on the same two objectives I have when teaching my students. There is always more to learn, and I know my students benefit from my efforts to increase my own self-awareness and I find great fulfillment as I synthesize information from my world in an effort to expand theirs.