

Teaching Philosophy | Calvin Olsen

My purpose as an educator is to guide students as they develop thinking and writing skills that transfer to any academic, professional, or personal context they may encounter in their future. In light of that purpose, my main teaching objective is 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 (1) self-awareness, (2) experiential learning, and (3) academic autonomy prepares students to continue a trajectory of learning in and after the courses I teach.

Self-awareness is, in my opinion, the most universally transferable skill I can offer my students. I try very hard to help them recognize their individual strengths, identify current weaknesses, and set reasonable goals for working in relation to both. The first assignment I give my students in every class is a self-evaluation. I provide some structure, but I want students to push themselves to generate multiple examples of strengths and weaknesses, expound on those examples in detail, and provide specific examples from past assignments and writing experiences to illustrate their points. This exercise gives me a baseline against which to measure each student's progress over the semester, and students learn to be proactive in their development as scholars and professionals. As we meet for individual conferences, I touch base with students about their progress and help them tweak their personal development plan for the course.

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 semesters to 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 and optimizing them to be effective pedagogical tools.

Regardless of whether they're learning to write for academic, creative, or professional audiences, I try to ensure that students get outside the classroom in order to understand how texts are put into motion and learn to see (and, ideally, see through) the persuasive power of writing in the world. It is easiest to achieve these outcomes when students experience first-hand the value of combining sources of information and modes of presentation. Different combinations of content and presentation influence different audiences, and rhetoric is the process of figuring out which

combinations work best. I provide various combinations in class, supplementing in-class instruction with student presentations, guest speakers, and field trips. These activities do more than break up the routine—they allow students to see beyond the classroom and engage with concepts in new and unfamiliar contexts where professionals put our learned principles into practice. I try to take every group of students on a field trip to a local or on-campus art museum for a loosely-structured writing exercise. As deliberately designed and organized cultural spaces, art museums demonstrate to students how real-world objects stand up to individual interpretation. Creative writing students can engage in ekphrasis, composition students can analyze artifacts in relation to each other, and literature students can get past the page and challenge the particulars of curation.

Underlying all of my writing and communication pedagogy is a desire to allow students to act autonomously. 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 transparency in my teaching so students may understand the pedagogical reasoning behind my methods. 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.

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—various pedagogical colloquia, course development workshops, faculty observations, etc.—I have curated a program of personal and pedagogical growth built on self-awareness, experiential learning, and autonomy. There is always more to learn, and working with students is a revolving door of incentive to do so.