

Teaching Philosophy

Over the years, my perspective on teaching has undergone several transitions. At first, as an adjunct instructor and then full-time instructor, I was completely student-centered. Later, after earning my doctorate and a tenure track line, I became more balanced in my approach to consider the individual needs of students but also the importance of scholarly and creative work that informs and enhances my teaching. Not entirely coincidentally, this is about the same time that Wake Forest University embraced the Teacher-Scholar Model, which emphasizes the balance I try to strike, and the model has been a comfortable one for me.

I have always tried to be a good teacher (which seems like a funny thing to write since so much of my scholarly work in recent years has involved depictions of “good” teachers in films and on television) in the sense that I am an expert in my field and form connections with students in the classroom that allow us to explore moving images and learn together in that process. What I hope students learn in my classes is how to take their tacit knowledge about popular culture texts and think and write about those texts in ways that engage critical thinking, improve their writing, and demonstrate an aesthetic, historical, and ideological understanding of how mass media, generally film and television, functions in society. This informed perspective also strengthens the creative work undertaken by those students who make media.

Teaching is a reciprocal relationship I enter into with students in which we examine “truth(s)” together. The more I learn about teaching, the more I think of it as learning alongside my students. At its best, hours spent in the classroom help students make links among theoretical constructs, media texts, and their personal experiences through a process of sharing ideas. They learn to see intertextual links among those constructs, selected texts, and their experiences and to see the broader cultural implications of the connections they uncover in ways they would not have been able to without curated viewing and discussion. At the same time, I learn to engage and appreciate media from their perspectives through what students share in class discussion. In the process, those hours help restore a sense of wonderment for some students that they had years before when they learned because they wanted to know rather than to score well on a particular test, and our time together reminds me that the teacher is not the only repository of knowledge in the classroom.

The two most important things I bring into the classroom are my “real world” experience and the fact that I care about each student I teach. I am not trying to diminish the contributions of my academic credentials and my own scholarly and creative work; those form a basis for my teaching, but my experience and my concern for students are what truly define who I am as a teacher. Over time, feedback from former students confirms that these factors have been instrumental and lasting as the foundation for their learning in classes they have taken with me. In my discipline, experience in the industries I teach about has been a critical component informing my credibility as a teacher.

When I think about the teachers who have been important to me, I remember them as uniformly knowledgeable about their subjects, they were filled with enthusiasm in the classroom, and they reacted to me as an individual rather than just another name on the class roster. Over the last fifteen years, I have introduced a number of innovations into my courses—I've flipped classes, developed online classes (long before the pandemic), and found an innovative way to integrate production into a series of critical media studies seminars. Now, after several decades in the classroom, I believe I am really hitting my stride as a teacher and feel closer than ever before to fulfilling the promise of the Teacher-Scholar Model.