

Sample Philosophies of Teaching from MTSU English Faculty

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While reading the sample philosophies and constructing your own, consider these reflective questions. Try to observe or recollect specific examples that support your thinking.

- What does teaching look like? What purpose does it serve?
- How is education defined, and what is its purpose?
- What makes learning valuable? What makes your specific subject area valuable and/or applicable?
- How does research, background, and experience impact teaching and learning?
- Who has informed or contributed—theorists, philosophers, educators, or otherwise—to your practice? What will you do to continue to grow your practice?
- What roles should teachers and learners play? How is trust developed among teachers and learners?
- What is diversity? Inclusion? How can the needs of diverse learners be recognized and met? How does diversity and inclusion contribute to classroom culture?
- Beyond the objectives, what are the most important lessons for a student to learn? How do students set and meet goals?
- What does a functional classroom look like? How can student engagement be encouraged?
- How are learning and teaching evaluated?

Elyce Helford

I became a professor because we can all do better to understand, care for, respect, and communicate with one another. Developing effective critical thinking skills as adults is central to this pursuit. Learning can make us better friends, loved ones, coworkers, citizens, and human beings.

This would be my perspective regardless of the discipline(s) and subjects I taught. I just so happen to love the way **literature** and **film** tell us about ourselves in their style, content, form, and production. Creative texts hit you in the head and the heart, at best encouraging compassionate growth and inspiring positive change to make the world a better place for each and all of us. I also love the study of history and culture, equally a part of literature and film. And I study and teach **popular culture** because understanding how the media shapes our world and worldview is vital to challenging negative impact and enhancing resistance, again to help us create positive change in the world.

Education is a slow process involving interaction with individuals at various stages of growth and self-awareness. I value my own ongoing education, which I strive to attain in various "classrooms" in my life, both formal and informal. Education is an adventure, a journey, and important hard work -- for all of us. **Learning** nourishes and frustrates, builds and tears down. I value the journey my students take with me and do all I can to help them value the experience.

Jennifer Wachtel Kates

My teaching philosophy rests on the assumption that my students and I are learning together. I am inviting them into the world of scholarship. They are my apprentices and my job is to help them become peers. But, the longer I teach, the younger my students get. That is, the greater the age and experience gap between us grows. If my goal is to help them become peers, I must work to narrow that gap. That's why the core value of my teaching philosophy is respect.

Respect for Students

I must respect my students' fear or anxiety about learning. I do this by validating it: "yes, this is difficult to learn. Yes, this is longer than anything you have written before; that must be scary." I respect that this is part of inexperience and youth, and I must remember when I was in that spot. I share these stories with my students and remind them it is normal to feel uneasy when trying something new. I encourage them to embrace the discomfort as a sign that they are growing.

I must respect students' interests and passions. I do this by listening to them talk about motorcycles or Pokemon or scrapbooking and then asking questions about these interests and passions. I encourage my literature students to make connections between the texts and their own lives. I must respect that not everyone wants to be an English professor, that it is my job to help them become themselves, not mini-mes. So I encourage students to write about topics they care about, adapt my assignments to their own fields of study. I also show respect for their opinions by asking for them.

I respect my students by including them in the scholarly life. I share my own work in progress and invite feedback. I include "publishing" as a step in the writing process, encouraging students to submit their work, read aloud at open mics, or actually mail the solicitation letters they write. I invite them to participate in my presentations and attend conferences and readings. It is important that students see themselves as scholars, as a part of the world their professors inhabit. When they share their work in the real world, the work itself becomes real. When I respect my students as peers-in-the-making, they begin to respect themselves and live up to the expectation.

In the classroom I respect the teacher-student contract by showing up, staying current, by listening to students' needs and adapting to them, and most of all by following through on my promises. I return graded exams and essays on time, I respond to emails and phone calls, I hold office hours and answer questions. This is respectful.

I respect the students' need to try and fail. I do this by providing lots of opportunities for trying, fast failing, and failing forward. I reward risk taking and encourage perseverance. I allow students to change their minds during discussion or revise an answer after thinking about it. I always require multiple drafts of writing, and I provide numerous types of writing for them to try: letters, blogs, formal essays, memoir. Trying something new is the only real way to learn, and overcoming failure is the only real way to develop the self-efficacy that will empower them.

Finally and most importantly, I respect my students' potential. I do this by demanding more. I will not baby my students or dumb down the material. It is disrespectful to assume and expect

that students cannot do what we ask of them. I respect my students when I give them honest feedback and assessments. If a student does poorly, I respect the student enough to assign a low grade. That D says “I know you are capable of far more than this.” I respect my students by raising the bar and then providing the tools for them to reach it.

Respect for Myself

“As long as you are green, you grow; as soon as you think you are ripe, you begin to rot.”

This was a favorite maxim of my father. As I enter my 26th year of teaching, I am reminded of its wisdom. On the one hand, it is increasingly difficult to stay green when I have amassed so many assignments and syllabi and discussion notes I can rely on so easily. I can probably teach “Barn Burning” in my sleep. On the other hand, the world in which I teach is changing more and more rapidly. Technology updates constantly, and the students are different, too. In fact, all of higher education is experiencing a sea change it seems. So it becomes even more necessary to stay alert and current—green.

I stay green by constantly renewing my teaching practices. I rotate in new courses every few semesters. I incorporate new readings every semester and create new assignments every year. Sometimes we move the furniture. Sometimes assignments have soundtracks. Sometimes we cut up our essays with scissors. Sometimes we take selfies.

Staying green also applies to the day-to-day progress of teaching. A successful teacher must be nimble and brave enough to change things mid-semester. If an assignment crashes, I revise. Likewise, I bring in current issues and stories throughout the semester, be it a meme from my Facebook feed, a new political ad, or a pedagogical discussion from the *Chronicle*. As we move toward using technology and away from traditional notions of composition, I have started to incorporate blogs, vlogs, eportfolios, and short films into my assignment list.

Finally, I stay green by continuing to be a student. We say we want our students to be lifelong learners, so we must model this for them. I attend and participate in curriculum development meetings and read about current pedagogy. I constantly ask peers for new assignment ideas and steal discussion techniques. I teach myself to use new programs. I seek out critique. I question my assumptions.

In the end, staying green is just a way of respecting my discipline, my colleagues, my university, and myself as a scholar. If my ultimate goal is to empower my students to be proactive problem solvers, I must show them that they can learn anything they want to, that nothing is unknowable. I do this by respecting them as peers in training and staying green myself.

Rhonda L. McDaniel

Hugh of St. Victor said it well when he gave this advice to his students in the twelfth century: “Learn everything; you will see afterwards that nothing is superfluous. A skimpy knowledge is not a pleasing thing.”¹ In a self-governing, democratic society, Hugh’s advice is a sure path to empowerment for men and women—not just economic empowerment, but personal as well. Yet how am I to communicate the benefits of learning as much as possible to my students?

Most of my teaching experience has come in universities with a significant undergraduate population of first-generation college students, so I quickly learned that one effective way to get students involved in classical and medieval literatures (or any other kind of reading) is to encourage them to ask questions. In order to facilitate this kind of engagement with the text, I assign students in all my literature classes to come to each class with three to five questions or comments about the assigned reading. Sometimes I use their questions and comments as a basis for group work or for full class discussions, at other times I respond to them in writing, especially if their questions were not addressed during the course of the class meeting. This practice establishes an informal but still informative level of communication between me and my students: it permits shy students to ask questions and receive validation for their ideas, increases class participation, provides a degree of accountability for reading the assignments, and gives me insight into how my students think and what aspects of the material they find difficult. Moreover, I invariably learn something new through answering their questions—and lifelong learning is why I became a teacher. When I teach classical and medieval literature, I think it especially important to reinforce the reality and common humanity that my students and I share with the people who produced the literature. To that end I bring materials such as papyrus and parchment to class for students to handle and use Powerpoint to present images of art, artifacts, and architecture from the period. Experiential learning opportunities, such as writing a phrase in Old English on parchment with a quill, bring home to my students the kind of time and commitment it took to produce a book before the advent of the printing press. This activity in particular facilitates reflection upon students’ assumptions about the value and availability of books and literacy in different times and places. Throughout all of my literature courses, my aim is to facilitate critical thinking and enable my students to understand and relate to the people of other times and places as fellow human beings. To attain this end I often ask students to reflect upon the political, moral, and ethical issues that arise in the texts, explain the perspectives expressed in the works, then write their own comparisons with modern views.

For graduate classes I consider it important to teach students not only about literature, but also about the variety of resources for research that are available (both in libraries and online) and how to critically evaluate those resources. In the Introduction to Graduate Studies course I always introduce students to the specific resources used in their own areas of interest and require written analyses of the resources, including comments on the strengths, usefulness, and potential shortcomings of the items under discussion. When the subject is Old English or Middle English, I assign translations and linguistic commentaries in order to increase the students’ skill and facility with the English language in its various stages of evolution as well its contemporary form. Graduate study should equip students to become scholars so that they may be effective teachers (a crucial link often overlooked in many graduate programs). When graduate students leave a course, they should be able to do research and educate themselves

on any topic so as to be able to teach that topic. As a means of encouraging such scholarship, I assign research projects and oral presentations on new material as integral parts of my graduate syllabuses.

The ability to find out information serves little purpose, however, unless that information can be applied to a larger context and effectively expressed in the students' own words. Thus, even when I teach freshmen I focus on showing my students how to analyze arguments, construct valid arguments of their own, and use the library and online resources to find data on their topics. By means of frequent writing assignments students at all levels learn how to communicate their own ideas more effectively. They also continually reflect upon how their ideas and opinions fit into the larger society of which they are a part.

In all my classes, I think it is important not only to teach students how to learn and to do their own research, but also to include relevant aspects of my research. Doing so broadens my own ability to teach my courses by continuing to add fresh material; it also encourages both undergraduate and graduate students to pursue their own research, to strive to learn as much as possible because they see that knowledge impacts them personally, professionally, and as members of a self-governing society.

¹ *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 137.

Alyson Muenzer

To kick off summer break 2015, I surprised my then twelve-year-old son with a trip to Holiday World, an amusement park located in Santa Claus, Indiana. Wil, my thrill-seeking son, was dazzled by the park's many roller coasters. Myself, I prefer rides that do not jar my body from right to left or cause me to keep my chiropractor on speed-dial. Yes, the swings, the carousel, the antique cars; they are more my speed. But, after seeing Wil fearlessly take on the park's newly-built Thunderbird, I knew I'd have to ride at least one roller coaster. So it was decided, then, that I would try The Legend, a wooden coaster with a track that wound up, down, sideways, and every which way. For the first half of the ride, I closed my eyes and buried my head, but at least I was doing it. After several swift, jarring turns, I opened my eyes, looked around, and soon realized that my fear had been replaced with exuberance, even confidence. And with this great confidence I did the unthinkable: I rode for a second time.

People who fear adrenaline rides are likely afraid of derailing, getting stuck, or plummeting to their certain death. Reflecting back nearly five years later, I am struck by the numerous similarities between teaching college English and braving a ride such as The Legend. When a new semester begins, most students are a little nervous to get on the ride, so to speak. What if they derail? Get stuck? Even worse, plummet to the ground? There's a point where students just have to trust that the coaster will safely get them through their journey. To this end, I become the coaster, and while I'm certainly no Legend, I believe our classroom experiences are quite legendary.

****Getting to Know Students & Building Trust****

In order to convince my students that "I am the coaster" to get them to their destination (a course grade of C or higher), I reach out to them. I also encourage them to reach out to each other. Often, this is done through a series of getting-to-know-you activities. Here, students understand that they have much in common, from hometowns to college majors to athletics. As the course progresses, perhaps during their mandatory conferences or Peer Response sessions, I use this information to further connect and foster trust. You'd be amazed by how many students lack confidence in their writing. Perhaps they've never practiced enough to feel comfortable. Perhaps they have had past instructors scrutinize their work yet offer little in way of writing feedback. Perhaps some just don't care about writing in general. Whatever the reason, I want my students' best effort; the best way to get what I want is to know them individually, to demonstrate my trustworthiness, and to shroud them in confidence. This must be done quickly before the semester, or the ride, metaphorically speaking, takes off in a series of mind-bending turns.

****Turning Mistakes into Learning Opportunities****

For the most part, students want to write better papers for teachers who appear sincere, for teachers who demonstrate that they, too, are human. Knowing this, I am quick to accept when I've made a mistake. Sometimes I discuss past mistakes and ask them what I could have done differently. Aside from an entertaining lesson in problem-solving, this approach shows student writers that if I make mistakes yet am willing to learn from them, they can as well. Maybe one student struggles to transition from one point to the next, while another struggles with word

choice and audience awareness. It's possible neither student knew beforehand that they even had these struggles. If I simply hand back a marked paper that reads "trans. needed" or "wc" (word choice), that might point out a mistake, but it fails to create an opportunity. Thus, we spend many class periods discussing how a mistake becomes an opportunity to edit and revise. Once they take advantage of these opportunities, they produce better work, resulting in better grades, all the while bracing for that next sharp turn or steep drop. By this time, though, maybe they are less fearful of where the coaster will take them next. So far, the coaster hasn't derailed or broken down in mid-air, and they come to understand that they can and will finish the rest of the ride.

****Dealing with Challenges****

All amusement park rides, even the carousel, feature a list of rules. In a perfect world, all students would show up on time, homework in hand, ready to take on any lesson I throw their way. True, some students fit this description, but not all. I have no remedy to cure late arrivals, "no-shows," or those who do not wish to be there. My course policies are clearly explained on the syllabus, and those students know that their actions will have consequences. There was a time, many years ago, when I troubled myself with such behaviors, even taking them personally. Now? I focus on those who do not push the boundaries of the course (or my limits), because thankfully, the number of students who are willing to follow the ride's specific "rules" is far greater than the number of students who are prohibited from riding for failure to follow the rules.

****Reflecting on My Role****

Over the past twenty years, many students have asked, "What motivates you to teach?" Honestly, I have to say that I do not require motivation to teach college English. The "teaching part" of my job is the easiest. Think about it. Five days a week, I am granted the opportunity to spend time with overall amazing groups of students. I hear their stories, share their writing struggles, offer them feedback, as well as create activities that both entertain and educate. Now, the "grading part" of my job is a different story. What motivates me here is that students are counting on me to evaluate their work, to let them know where they stand. Personally, I'm glad they care, as caring shows me that they are invested in this class, and not just financially.

****Finishing the Ride****

When the coaster pulls into the loading/unloading dock at the end of a given semester, I'm not expecting any student to remark, "Let's ride again!" Yes, I will ride again (and again and again), but with future students—while they will move on to try the amusement park's other rides, maybe the daunting Thunderbird or the intimidating Voyager. Legend has it, though, that students have fond memories of their first thrill ride, and as their assigned coaster, I feel honored to have taken them on that journey.

Steve Severn

My philosophy of teaching starts with the belief that regardless of the specific subject matter under consideration, teachers must recognize that they are leaders and not merely people who present information to students. Teachers must motivate and inspire, provide academic guidance, demonstrate professional expertise and act as impartial and honest judges of student performance. Most importantly, teachers must have a vision of where they want to lead their students, a plan to get them there and the commitment to see the journey through.

Speaking specifically as a teacher of English, my most fundamental pedagogical goal is actually quite simple: I seek to make my students conscious of the language that they use unconsciously every day. This is an absolutely essential project because language in all of its forms – verbal, written, visual – is the vehicle that we humans use to understand each other. Yet, the vast majority of people take it utterly for granted, never stopping to discern how it works or to consider the ethical, moral, political or practical ramifications of its machinations. At the start of every semester, whether I am teaching a composition or a literature course, I open my students' eyes to this fact by asking the following, seemingly innocuous, question: Why is it that native speakers of English overwhelmingly see an "old, red, Victorian house" and never a "Victorian, red, old house" or a "red, Victorian, old house"? Invariably, the exercise proves frustrating for students. They recognize that we live in a culture that can only speak of an "old, red Victorian house" but beyond the unsatisfying answer of "because it just sounds right," they find themselves unable to articulate the factors that cause exclusion of all other possibilities. I use that frustration as a gateway for learning because it demonstrates the extent to which language has been an unconscious act for them. That realization, in turn, is the first step toward developing the active listening and reading skills that form the basis for effective critical thinking and writing.

Leah Soule

Traditionally, education is a necessary tool of indoctrination; citizens are taught to function within the parameters of civilized society to propagate cultural knowledge. Such indoctrination is immensely important for order and survival; however, it can be costly. Students struggle to make critical connections, explore wonderment, and invest wholeheartedly in their education. My goal as a teacher of research and writing is primarily to help students become more effective communicators, but secondarily, I encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and develop curiosity.

My classroom is student-centered and my curriculum is carefully scaffolded to meet course objectives, promote critical and analytical thinking, and emphasize the practical purpose of every assignment. Lessons focus on discussion, peer review, group activities, and games. By using a variety of genres to compose low-risk and high-risk assignments, students learn to develop sentences, paragraphs, and essays, to meet the language expectations of a specific audience, to use and analyze rhetorical strategies, and to manipulate grammar and punctuation for a specific purpose. The writing they produce is shared with their peers through oral presentations, written response, online forums, and peer review. Perhaps most importantly, students learn the utility of effective written communication and its application beyond the composition classroom.

Continuous reflection and observation are imperative because my curriculum is based on the diversity of my students. Material must be adapted specifically for each class, and individuals must be observed interacting with the material to ensure its relevance. On the surface, students are observed and evaluated through in-class discussion, quizzes, and rubrics; however, authentic student input is essential. Students are provided with verbal and written opportunities to assess writing assignments, curriculum structure, and my teaching methods. Apart from student input, I reflect through collaborating with my colleagues on types of assignments and assessments, innovative teaching ideas, and the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of specific class sessions. Nevertheless, regardless of student responses to questionnaires and inquiries and despite consultations with fellow teachers, I can only correct and enhance my skill through practice, trial and error, and the acknowledgement of the intense fluctuation of my students.

Attending workshops, presenting at conferences, guest lecturing, serving on committees, and participating in teaching programs keeps me up-to-date on new resources, practices, and methodologies. Through these avenues, I am exposed to teachers with different backgrounds, skill levels, and ideas. I absorb as much as possible from these encounters and incorporate the teachers' innovations into my curriculum so that it remains interesting for both me and my students. Also, through these experiences, I am able to share my own ideas with fellow teachers and receive informed feedback. A combination of leadership and learning keeps me fresh, invested, interested, and curious.

Language is a powerful tool, and research is a potent ally. Writing, reading, and communicating are not passive or innocuous activities. By encouraging students to uncover the relevancy and purpose of their own writing and the words of others, they realize the genuine impact of their voices.

Lisa E. Williams

Often, college students, regardless of age and background, enter the composition classroom lacking confidence and fundamental writing and communication skills. I confront these teaching obstacles by creating a collaborative environment that encourages students to experience the writing process as a communal activity. Working together requires them to take individual responsibility for and ownership of their own progress while also supporting their peers. My teaching philosophy utilizes this collaborative atmosphere to instill confidence, empathy, and patience in my students. Furthermore, incorporating lessons and assignments that require reflecting on the past and planning for the future allow room for students' distinct voices to grow, encouraging them to recognize their immeasurable potential.

I strive to show my students that diligence, critical thinking, and the ability to communicate with both voice and pen are crucial in becoming an improved reader, writer, and thinker. I also emphasize, through combining traditional, creative, and multimodal assignments, that writing is not only a vital skill for effective communication but also an art to be explored, an influence and form of expression not unlike fashion or music. My lessons include daily journaling to reflect and to brainstorm, and students routinely participate in workshops to promote self-discipline and teamwork as they develop their assignments. I am also an advocate for integrating technology in the classroom. I have experienced firsthand how utilizing technological resources can impact auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners.

In addition, I believe in learning about and including students' interests as a method to reach the class on a personal level and to build on their foundation of knowledge. Requiring students to explore their previous and current interests in music, literature, sports, and film is a means to explore and analyze the impact of ideologies, and it also helps them make connections among their life experiences and goals. Doing so is also a platform to teach students about critical analysis and the power of communication and audience awareness, and it results in emotive discussions about the effectiveness of a text. Accordingly, they learn to recognize their talents as well as pinpoint what skills should be further honed. The ability to use writing and communication skills to identify problems as well as plan and propose efficient solutions makes them more confident decision makers and agents in their personal and professional paths.

Finally, instead of acting as a strict authoritarian, my role is to facilitate and guide students with consistent encouragement and open discussion while also, through my own actions, exemplifying professional behavior and appropriate classroom conduct. When the time comes to provide students with feedback and grades, I respond with constructive comments and opportunities for revision and discussion. By listening to students, I understand how to improve and evolve my teaching philosophy so I can be an effective instructor.