

## Teaching Philosophy

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The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think - rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men.

– James Beattie, *Essays on Poetry and Music as they affect the Mind, on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; and the Usefulness of Classical Learning* (1770)

Learning has very little to do with obedience: whether that be construed as pleasing mentors, copying instructions or committing things to memory. Of greater consequence is the student's ability to internalise a *method* of thought, which she or he should be free to evolve and act upon for themselves. I see the role of the teacher as someone who can supply the tools for critical thinking but who must never interfere with the passions and interests of the student (the 'what to think' in Beattie's formulation). The teacher ought to provide no more than the scaffolding for classroom discussion. As the student becomes more capable of self-management and of lending weight to their ideas, so the role of the teacher should diminish over time.

My aim when teaching English literature to students is to allow them to participate as actors in the continuing history of a text. As a supervising and mediating presence, I try to increase the sum of available responses and the number of parts that they can play in discussions. The development of detached judgements and feedback loops between the teacher and the students is vital for extending the free play of different viewpoints and for building greater multiplicity (and humour) into the discussion. Rather than try to synthesise 'joint' positions between students, I like to make disagreement a constructive exercise. Occasionally, I will task pairs of students to advance or oppose a position that may actively conflict with the readings they have used in a prior essay or presentation. This strategy can work well for improving reasoning skills and for developing further interpretations. I may also ask a student to present on someone else's chosen topic.

I am passionate about the benefits of peer dialogue and allowing this to evolve in classroom discussion. Peer dialogue emboldens the students to motivate each other, to provide alternative perspectives on problems that the teacher may not have foreseen and to explain things in a language they understand and that the teacher can use to increase social confidence and classroom participation. While I favour the creative discussions that can occur through peer dialogue, I discourage peer comparison. An excessive concern with ranking and grades can have unpredictable and volatile effects on motivation and self-esteem. Rather my goal is to develop the student's lifelong capacity for self-assessment and to move them away from dependency at every level (including the use of weak auxiliary verbs) towards their new status as independent learners and critical thinkers.

I like to make use of student presentations. Doing individual question-and-answer feedback sessions on presentations with smaller groups allows me to model attentive listening and response to their ideas and to demonstrate personal knowledge of each student. I find it forces them to own their thoughts far more effectively than they do when writing in isolation. Student presentations also allow me to ensure that all are contributing to the class and are fully aware of the criteria that is being applied to them individually. I will often partner students for brainstorming exercises according to the strengths and weaknesses they have shown during presentations before following-up with tasks on essay structure to see how they will get from A to B in pieces of extended writing.

Teaching improves everyone's ability to plan and think ahead. Letting students know well in advance what expectations you have of them and where their responsibilities lie is vital for building trust, transparency and leadership. Being able to anticipate, identify and analyse problems as they arise and to retain focus and motivation in the pursuit of long-term objectives is crucial to all aspects of learning development. My priorities lie in developing and sustaining excellent organisational skills so that students can learn the ability to prioritise work under pressure, to meet expectations, and to manage competing workloads while still enjoying all aspects of their life. My students continue to stay in touch with me long after they have finished the courses I teach them because of the ways in which I give their personalities new range, scope and direction.