

**Certificate in College Teaching
Teaching Portfolio**

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Introduction

I began teaching two years ago with woefully minimal training. I had never formally observed or assisted teaching a class, let alone designed and run one of my own. I was lucky to have found at CU a handful of insightful and ever-present mentors who helped me tackle my first courses as an instructor, and I have learned a tremendous amount during my year as a department Lead for the GTP.

But I have also come to understand that teaching is a constant work-in-progress, a never-ending series of questions to answer, problems to solve, and ways to improve which can be both intimidating and incredibly stimulating. As I sit here to write a statement on my philosophy of teaching and learning, an activity which in and of itself is a valuable way to reflect upon and assess my own teaching, I am also cognizant of the impermanence of my thoughts. I hope to teach for many more years to come, and I hope that as I teach, my philosophy of teaching and learning changes, grows, and expands too.

This portfolio contains a statement on my current philosophy of teaching and learning, statements on my modes of student and personal assessment, and a statement on diversity in the classroom. Finally, I have included a number of appendices which illustrate many of the points made in my philosophy of teaching and learning statements, and speak more generally to my teaching at CU Boulder.

Teaching Statements

I. Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

Teaching English literature to undergraduates has been one of the most critical sources of my development as a scholar and academic. As a third year PhD Candidate in the department of English at CU, I have had the opportunity to teach four sections of an upper-division undergraduate Shakespeare for Non-Majors course titled English 3000 over the past three semesters. It is through the process of learning to teach the very material I have spent so long grappling with as a student that I have come to interrogate my own reading practices, hone my critical thinking skills, expand my modes of inquiry, and examine the purpose and form of my writing. But more importantly, teaching has challenged me to become cognizant of and purposeful with the methods and modes of pedagogy I employ. I have been challenged to address the particular needs and opportunities presented by each section of English 3000, which has in turn allowed me to become more engaged with the “how” of teaching – the skills, methods, learning objectives, and outcomes – rather than simply the “what” – the material being taught.

My teaching philosophy has roots in both traditional and new pedagogies, and is ultimately founded upon my effort to empower and support students to become their own teachers, curious about the subjects they encounter in life, and confident in their skills to address both the familiar and the unknown. Jane Tompkins, a high-profile English teacher at Duke university, wrote a soul-baring book on her decades of experience as a teacher entitled, *A Life in the Classroom*. In it, Tompkins advocates for academe to go beyond the marketability of a student, and instead educate "the whole human being" -- mind, body, and spirit. No short order to fill, but I vehemently agree, especially in this time of crisis for the humanities in academia and canonical English literature more specifically. I am less interested in telling my students the things I know or think about a play we read, than teaching them the skills they need in order to read a play themselves, and uncover all of the nuance, complexity, and joy of reading poetry and drama. I do not underestimate the power which a positive point of contact with literature or the arts can bare on any individual. In the words of the late and great Maya Angelou, “They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

In order to teach students effectively, I believe the classroom environment must be established to encourage effective learning. This starts with getting to know the students as well as possible. I begin this immediately in my classes, assigning a detailed Entrance Survey on the first day which gives me more insight into the makeup of my students, why they enrolled in the course, and what they are hoping to learn (Appendix D). I subsequently adapt my lesson plans and activities to the demands of the material and the needs of my students. For example, I conduct mid-term check-ins once per month, which ask students to offer feedback on both the course itself and their own experience as a student (Appendix E). I check in with my students regularly throughout the semester so I can incorporate their feedback in my future lesson plans and assignments, and I make myself highly accessible to them for help outside of class throughout the semester (Appendix F). The other side of getting to know my students well and ensuring that the end goal of my pedagogy is their experience in the classroom is that students must get to know each other in order to create a supportive learning environment. Small group activities, think-pair-shares, and other content-oriented “ice-breakers” help to achieve this. Since I teach a non-majors course, I encourage my students to keep an open mind to make a new friend or two in the class – people they might not encounter in the other paths they tread on campus.

On a larger structural scale, I consider the makeup of the students in a course when formulating the learning objectives and course design. For example, the learning objectives of an upper-division non-English major's Shakespeare course are different from an introductory level course for English majors on the same subject. The former might focus more on reading comprehension, basic identifiers and structural elements of early modern drama, and vocabulary specific to dramatic literature and Shakespeare in which class discussion and analysis can be grounded. A major's course might instead focus more on the writing structure of literary analysis, beginning with short lessons on theses, introductions and conclusions, and paragraph form, or specific vocabulary of figurative language and how to identify them in early modern poetic verse.

My teaching philosophy is also predicated upon the belief that nothing can replace the ontological value of direct experience, which means that the highest form of learning must come from endogenous and embodied knowledge. In order to achieve this, I strive to employ an almost singularly interactive and participatory pedagogy in which students themselves become the explorers and pioneers of the material. I use activities such as small group worksheets and writing assignments, debates, in-class performances, and full-class readings, rather than more traditional didactic methods such as lecturing or testing. While lecture can be an efficient way to transmit information – and I do sometimes use short lectures, no more than ten minutes at a time – the problem comes not from the content transmitted, but from the very fact that it is transmitted to rather than emitted from the student. For example, rather than lecture students about Shakespeare's manipulation of dialogic sonnet structure at the climax of act one in *Romeo and Juliet*, I designed a lesson plan which tasks the students to analyze the text, observe the discrepancies from traditional sonnet structure which are noteworthy, and then offer some thoughts about why the playwright would intentionally alter the structure of poetic verse and form at precisely that moment.

To take experience as the highest authority pedagogically is particularly appropriate for the instruction of Shakespeare, a primarily dramatic author whose works were meant to be embodied long before they had a life on the page. I prioritize a performance-based approach to Shakespeare, particularly for non-major students whose primary learning objective is to form a solid understanding of the texts. For example, during the first week of class, I ask students to perform a tableau of the opening scene of the first play of the semester, previously *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The class must work together as a group and determine how to arrange themselves onstage. By the end of the semester, students create their own performance of one full act of a play we have studied. In the three semesters I have taught, these performances have been a huge success, and have been many students' favorite aspect of the course (Appendices D and F). To acknowledge experience as the highest authority is critical to my ultimate goal as an instructor, which is to empower students to become their own teachers.

II. Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and Evaluation of Student Learning

I assess student learning both formatively and summatively. The most important formative (non-graded) way in which I assess student learning is through daily participation, which accounts for attendance, engagement with in-class activities and discussions, and completion of all in-class work assignments. I look for individual improvement over the course of the semester. Other formative ways in which I assess student learning is through office hours,

which are not required by strongly encouraged, and monthly check-ins. The check-ins are designed in two parts: the first, to ask students to evaluate the class and my teaching, and the second, to evaluate their own progress as students (Appendix E). Both sections give me insight into my students' experience of the class –what is challenging, what is going well, what is working or not, etc. The second section in particular allows me to see how students feel they are doing as students tackling the material, as well as engage students in the important pedagogical process of self-reflection and formative evaluation.

I summatively assess students with a range of assignments and metrics designed specifically for the material and students of English 3000. This includes the participation grade, a variety of writing assignments ranging from informal blog posts to formal film scene analyses, and the final performance-based project. The participation grade is based on attendance and active participation during daily lessons, which is critical to a performance-based approach to learning. For written assignment, I provide a great deal of written feedback which includes both marginal comments and ending commentary, in addition to detailed grading rubrics for each assignment (Appendix C). The Final Project, an original assignment which tasks students to form “mini theater companies” and produce a performance of one full act of a play we have read to be performed in class, emphasizes process, group work, and individual work in the detailed grading rubric (Appendix B).

Rubrics are a hugely important part of my pedagogical philosophy when it comes to evaluation and assessment of undergraduate English literature. In a “subjective” field, it is important that students understand the exact criteria on which they will be evaluated as they work on assignments, which rubrics can help to accomplish. And finally, extra credit is another way in which I assess student learning, and, importantly, their ambition and work ethic in the course. I offer a large amount of extra credit in my courses, which are designed to further students' learning outside of the material covered in-class, and provide a way for students to “come back” from a low paper or quiz grade, rewarding those students who put particular effort into the course in order to earn a higher grade. For example, I offer 1% of extra credit counted toward the final course grade for visit a student pays to the campus Writing Center, followed by the submission of a reflection form explaining their session (Appendix A).

Of My Own Teaching

As a new teacher with little prior training, assessing and evaluating my own teaching has been critical to my growth and success as a teacher. I have sought out many opportunities to evaluate my own teaching, and to have other trustworthy instructors and mentors evaluate my teaching. This has included three video-tape consultations, two conducted through the Center for Teaching and Learning, and one through the English department (Appendix H). I have had three English faculty members attend my class and offer feedback (Dianne Mitchell, Marty Bickman, and Christie-Anne Leopold). And lastly, I have had the privilege of training two MA students this past semester who shadowed my class and guest-taught one class session. In my many conversations with my trainees, I often asked for their candid feedback on my own teaching as they prepared for theirs, which led to many important and insightful conversations. During the class sessions in which the MA students guest-taught. During these sessions, I was afforded the perspective of my students in my own classroom, which was a unique way to understand how a teacher is perceived from the student perspective. For example, I learned that a ten-second silence does not feel long at all from a desk, but from the front of the room it can seem an eternity!

It is also important that I assess my teaching through my students directly. This is one of the primary functions of the monthly check-ins I conduct with my students. The check-ins are designed in two parts: the first, to ask students to evaluate the class and my teaching, and the second, to evaluate their own progress as students. The first part of the student check-ins guide my pedagogy and lesson-planning throughout the semester, and are the most immediate form of feedback I can get from my students. Other ways in which I collect student feedback are through an assigned Exit Survey, and the Faculty Course Questionnaires, or FCQs (Appendix F). The assigned Exit Survey asks my students to provide specific, detailed feedback about various aspects of the course design and my teaching style. I have used the feedback from these surveys every semester in which I re-design the course. The FCQs can also be an important student assessment of my teaching. Though many studies have shown the biases inherent in the FCQ structure and design, they are ultimately the only campus-wide metric by which teaching can be evaluated. Accordingly, I explain the FCQs and their functions to my students, and I ultimately value the feedback my students provide in the FCQs.

III. Diversity Statement

Inclusive excellence is predicated upon the belief that the most meaningful learning comes from embracing and utilizing a diverse community of students. This is particularly appropriate in a non-majors English class, a less-homogenous group than many other English classes. On the first day, I ask students to seize the opportunity of working with a diverse group of new and unfamiliar classmates from a wide range of backgrounds, listening to each others' opinions as they advance their own. Empathy – taking the perspective of another – is one of the central tenets of my learning philosophy, and one which is wonderfully accessible through the works of Shakespeare. s

To take another perspective is to not privilege one's own opinion over another. It can be tremendously challenging to practice, but I believe dramatic literature can help train us to do it. For example, among plays I have taught, *Othello* inevitably brings up contentious discussions of race; *Taming of the Shrew* brings up problematic gender roles and norms; and *The Merchant of Venice* must confront anti-Semitism. Because much of the material itself brings up challenging or contentious issues to discuss, I find this a perfect opportunity to learn how to have these conversations in a safe environment. The first way I approach this is to model an appropriate tone, and help provide some vocabulary in-context which can aid in discussion. We then use the material to give us a working text on which to direct our questions and problematizations.

I make a concerted effort to embrace diversity in my classes in its many forms – social, economic, racial, national, geographic, religious, political, gender identity, sexuality, etc. When contentious issues are raised in class, I seek to facilitate discussions which offer a range of different perspectives on the issue, and allow the students themselves to parse through and challenge one another when they disagree or misunderstand. I have sought out a variety of training sessions on how to manage and lead difficult discussions, and maintain this effort as a primary one to constantly improve upon throughout my future teaching career. I am very proud that my FCQ scores on my equitable treatment of all students has been consistently very high throughout my brief teaching career (Appendix F).

