

Teaching Philosophy

Years ago, I identified myself as a teacher who was keenly aware of the need to teach skills; I still see the study of English as a study of the various aspects of the literacy enterprise. As a teacher in this subject area, I must always be focused on the need to help students access all that the practice of literacy has to give to us: the ability to communicate effectively and meaningfully with one another, the ability to express ourselves clearly and appropriately for the arena in which we communicate, the ability to connect with others and ourselves through language. Every aspect of the English classroom makes this possible: from the instructions students receive when they walk in the door to the most sublime of moments in a discussion, this entire classroom serves as a space where we wrestle with language and communication and can draw attention to even the smallest moments of human interaction to find the teachable moment.

In this way, I see myself now focused on helping students become more skillful. Yes, I teach skills and help them deepen their experience of and facility with the products of literacy, and I also help them to bring those tools into connection with themselves. The skillful practitioner of literacy, the competent communicator is one who is open to experience, is thoughtful in response, is careful in discussion to listen.

Over the years, I've come to understand skillful practice as an act of love, and I embrace love as the basis for my teaching now. Through the practical application of mindfulness (in secular and spiritual environments), I have found myself growing into a person who tries to be present to people. Whether I'm doing the one-on-one, group, or full class teaching moment, I try to bring my whole self to the space and to ensure that my whole self in that moment is, in the sense that Thich Nhat Hanh would be talking about it, my happiest self, my authentic self. To be a good teacher is, to me, to be present and to teach students to be present to the material they study. They may not enjoy every subject—just as they may not enjoy every person they meet—and that's just part of life. Finding a way through that difficulty—finding a way to connect with that which seems disconnected from one's interests and self—is what I want to help them do.

Literacy is, in this regard, a gift. Reading gives us more opportunities to meet people, especially in our youth when our worlds are small. Writing allows us an opportunity to engage in conversation—with ourselves and others—and to see the ideas and beliefs, thoughts and feelings, that we live with, try on, occupy. Speaking and listening are the oral/aural versions of these two literacy skills and are easier to learn but can be so much harder to master. The English classroom is the place where these all come together, the lab of communication instruction. It's the best place to be.

So, how does this manifest in my classroom? I use whatever methods are available and seem appropriate for the goal and the students. I try to teach in chunks of time; my least enjoyable lessons are the ones where I'm expected to lecture for an entire class period, and even in these moments, I find ways to break the rhythm with small group/pair discussion, brief writing assignments to help students think more deeply about the subject, and class-wide building of a concept together.

One of most important aspects of the work is to teach students how to slow down. Being present to language and the people that use it to communicate with us demands that we take the opportunities available to thoroughly and thoughtfully engage them. My classroom is a space where we read, write,

and think about those two activities. If I can help students to see the value in taking time to hone their abilities to work with texts now, I can better equip them to tackle the texts they'll encounter later.

In the end, my teaching philosophy is really my student learning philosophy. I seek to help students become self-sufficient readers, to learn to question the texts they encounter in my and other classes. I hope that they emerge with an ability to read through and beyond primary text materials and to identify those moments when their discovery will be enhanced by further reading and secondary research. My ultimate hope is that students will see reading and writing as proper ends of education in themselves and as linked parts of the literacy continuum

Classroom Management Plan

Management and Instructional Priorities

The study of language and literature is the study of boundaries; words provide shape to the world around us and allow us to break the borders of our solitary bodies to share with the other beings with whom we walk this earth. Classroom management is, to me, about setting and maintaining boundaries so that our small community can be productive. Boundaries contain us, yes, but they also set us free to explore and dive deeply into the wealth of knowledge the world has to offer.

It took me a long time to understand that boundaries are part of the way we love one another. We have to know what is acceptable to ourselves and those around us in order to successfully negotiate and navigate the world and the spaces we inhabit. The classroom is one of the most important learning grounds in this regard.

My commitment to creating the beloved community demands that I approach management and instructional priorities with an eye toward helping students understand, engage, and enact healthy boundary-respecting behaviors toward themselves and others, while also preparing them to meet the same in the outside world. Classroom rules and procedures are grounded in an understanding and expectation that our respect for one another's humanity—including the writers of the texts we study and the people and subjects of which they write—demands that we approach our time together in an orderly fashion so that we maximize our opportunities to learn and share with one another.

Physical Space Arrangement

To the extent that it is possible, I prefer a mixed seating arrangement that allows for customization in the moment; being able to group students around small tables or floor cushion seating, for example, or having the potential to create a mini-theatre platform to engage in learning about oral and theatrical communication demonstrates a level of care and concern for students as human beings with individual needs. Traditional classroom furniture (the chair with fixed desktop) is uncomfortable and unwieldy unless one simply would like to contain bodies in neat rows of seats.

Having said that: I have been teaching for nearly two decades and I have taught in any sort of space you can imagine. The only thing that I know I want to include in any classroom space is a Zen Zone, a place for students to sit when they need to “check out” of an activity. Use of the space comes with the understanding that I will check in on them to make sure they're OK.

Rules: Practicing Community Courtesy

Basic Courtesies for Community:

1. Be on time.
2. Be ready to learn (materials needed are present and usable, assignments have been prepared, brain is on and focused).
3. Be open to new ideas, challenges, and opportunities for growth.
4. Be present to the work of this class.
5. Be the respect you want to receive in the world.

These courtesies are posted in the classroom and will be explicitly taught and modeled in the opening weeks of the school year. Each of these courtesies are critical to strong classroom community formation; for students to learn, they must come ready and prepared to learn AND understand that they also have a duty to help ensure a good environment for others to learn as well.

Courteous participation in the classroom community garners rewards through a simple point system. Five points are available on a daily basis, one for each of the five courtesies. These points will be factored into the student's quarterly grade. Note: points are not guaranteed; rather, students earn them by engaging in these behaviors in every class.

When courtesies are not respected (i.e., the underlying rules are broken), students will first be given a warning (verbal and discreet). Continued community breaches will result in a conversation after class. If the breaches persist, I will contact parents/guardians and, if necessary, engage school behavior protocols.

Severe breaches of community (i.e. situations that cause a danger to the student or others) will be immediately escalated according to school and/or district policy.

Classroom Procedures

Classroom Procedures are linked to our Courtesies:

1. Be on time:
 - Enter the classroom quickly and orderly.
 - Take your seat and put unnecessary items (backpack, cellphones, jackets, etc.) away neatly.
 - Check the board for the day's starter activity.
2. Be ready to learn:
 - Quietly begin your work on the day's starter activity.
 - Have any homework assignment on your desk ready to be checked/collected.
 - Have paper and pen/pencil prepared for work.
3. Be open to new ideas, challenges, and opportunities for growth:
 - Listen to classroom discussion and follow along with the conversation so that you can ask questions, offer ideas, and generally engage with the topic.
 - If you have a strong reaction to something that is said, read, or discussed in class, take a thinking break—use your notebook as a place to work out your thoughts on paper before you engage in the conversation.
4. Be present to the work of this class:

- Electronic communication devices are generally not allowed. If you are unable to leave them appropriately stored in your backpack or purse, you are to use one of the slots in the classroom phone caddy.
- Bathroom passes, bane of every classroom teacher's existence, are to be used judiciously. One pass, one person out at a time. Write your name on the board next to the pass when you leave. If you're gone too long (i.e., more than 5 minutes), I will send out a search party to escort you back. You don't want the search party. Trust me.
- Turn in work to the appropriate spot/bin in the classroom.
- Late work will be accepted for up to one week after the due date. After that point, the work cannot be submitted for credit or grading.

5. Be the respect you want to receive in the world:

- Speak when it's your turn. Listen when it's not.
- When we're working quietly, respect that quiet. If you finish your work early, work on your current book or your journal while you wait for us to finish.
- Use your journal or the Zen Zone if you need to take a moment to manage strong emotional responses. I will respect your use of these activities in the moment and check on you when I'm able to see what I can do to help.