Teaching Statement

Name

One of the first things I teach my literature students is to pay attention to silences. The first day of each of my classes involves a short in-class reading and/or a free association session about course themes and concepts, and at some point during the ensuing discussion, there is always a silence. After letting it linger awhile, I use this first silence as an opportunity to explore the many things silences in discussion can mean. First and foremost, I suggest, silences can simply mean that time is needed to process the topic at hand. Not all answers and responses arise immediately. The best ones often take time. Asking of Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* a question like “Why did Anil leave Sri Lanka at the end?” usually results in a productive silence as students begin to sift through the factors involved in Anil’s overdetermined act. Silences can also mean that we are uncertain what is being asked of us. These silences represent an opportunity to identify the sources of uncertainty and either resolve them or work toward clarification. And some silences, I explain, mean that students are bored by the question. Yet even these apparently most useless of silences are valuable, I insist, because they offer a chance to recognize and respond to that disinterest. Is the question unrelated to the aspects of the topic at hand that I care most about? Do I disagree with how it is framed? Even as simplistic a question about Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* as “Is Najwa intelligent?” can be made productive by unpacking the complexities that the question sidesteps. Silences after unexciting questions let us consider how to reroute the conversation in more promising directions. The only kind of silence to be avoided is the silence of having not prepared and so not being equipped to respond knowledgeably. What all the other silences have in common is that they present time for us to think. What we do during class silences is therefore among the most important work we will do all semester and should be appreciated and embraced accordingly. Demonstrating my commitment to use rather than avoid silences on day one also has the side effect of encouraging lively discussion, as students get used to the idea that I won’t “rescue” them from silences by taking over the conversation myself.

Classroom silences are one of my favorite pedagogical tools for developing challenging habits of reflection, adaptability, and preparation central to the study of literature. Ten years ago I was much less comfortable with silences. Over a decade of experience teaching at the junior high, high school, and university levels, as well as tutoring one-on-one in the university and the community, has deepened my conviction in the importance of these habits to literary study and education more generally and broadened my understanding of how they can be achieved. Today, I encourage students to think of the deer-in-the-headlights moments of staring at a paper draft and not knowing what to write next as another, more personal version of our classroom silences—as a chance to listen to themselves and to reflect on why they’re stuck. In both writing and discussion tasks, I set high expectations for student work while developing frameworks for thinking about texts and how and why we respond to them that will help students meet those expectations.

My classroom is a place to practice reflecting on and developing understandings of and responses to texts and contexts (including classroom contexts). Though I demand rigorous preparation from my students and myself, I also emphasize and model the importance of changing one’s mind to foster the liberal arts values of curiosity and openness to new knowledge, skills, and understandings—values central to a transformative Jesuit education. I balance planned lesson material with responsiveness to student questions, confusion, prior knowledge, and interests, building flexibility into my syllabi and lesson plans to allow me to react to student needs and interests and explore their resonance with our course goals and themes. Teaching flexibly does not mean denying that I am the expert in the room; it means considering the ways in which expertise is not the whole story of the subject I teach—in the classroom or in the world. I teach a subject, but I also teach a unique group of students whom I encourage to bring their own experiences, goals, and questions to the material even as they remain open to new perspectives. I encourage students to explore the ways that each group’s myriad axes of diversity interact with the aspects of the world addressed by texts like Teju Cole’s *Every Day Is for the Thief*, Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*.

My literature courses also direct students to balance preparation and flexibility through close reading. In class I model close readings of key points in texts, and my course assignments—from online forums to final papers—demand that students develop proficiency in similar detail-oriented analysis of literary techniques, patterns, and content in relation to the text as a whole and the contexts of production and reception. Excellent close reading can, however, seem like an unapproachable monolith—The Professor’s Analysis—intimidatingly distant from what some students may feel capable of (or interested in), particularly in impromptu class discussions. So, I complement carefully prepared close reading with a student-oriented complementary practice I call “reading closer,” which starts not from a prepared textual insight but from students’ questions and confusion. When reading closer in-class, students identify places of interpretive difficulty in a text and take the time, individually and/or in groups, to re-read that section of the text looking for key details and routes toward greater understanding. Then we discuss some of these sections and processes as a whole group to develop a more confident interpretation, or at least a better sense of what is making interpretation difficult. The resultant insights rarely equal the polish or efficiency of the prefabricated expert readings I present via lecture, but this is the point—to practice reading just a little bit closer as a first step toward more polished interpretations that are the products of similar processes. Reading closer helps students see how to get from their reading practices to the finished close readings I model in lectures, demonstrating that what lies between is not an uncrossable chasm but incremental, purposeful hard work applied to an analytical skill set useful in many areas of their lives. Reading closer also reinforces that meaningful literary analysis can arise from flexible pursuit of student questions and interests, not just from a teacher’s or student’s existing priorities.

At the core of my pedagogy is the message that our understandings—of ourselves, each other, and the world—are being continually informed and altered as our experiences provide new insights and perspectives. By modeling and encouraging habits of preparation, openness, flexibility, and reflection, I aim to help students develop knowledge and skills applicable to literature, but also to foster greater awareness of and control over their learning processes in the classroom and beyond. I encourage students to explore both otherness and connection as we read canonical texts alongside overlooked and new authors and literary media and forms. We engage in dialogue and solitary reflection, emphasize process and product, pursue both student-centered and expert-based inquiry, and seek meaning in multiple perspectives and contexts founded on what is in the text. In all these ways, I challenge my literature students to engage complexity while navigating the difficult choices inherent in critical thinking and effective communication practices. And while I insist that critical thinking and communication skills have far-reaching utility, I challenge students to consider how the value of a literature class transcends such immediate utility. Teaching literature is for me a craft and not just a career because these fields also hone our appreciation of beauty, creativity and risk taking, and they help us remain ready to revise our conceptions of ourselves, the world, and our place in it. I seek to share with my students the value in devoting attention to matters whose utility isn’t always obvious, like fiction, otherness, and silence.