

JESSE STOMMEL

TEACHING STATEMENT

I hear a small groan as I ask for help rearranging our classroom's desks into yet another configuration. But moments later the students are eagerly on their feet, the modular carpet tiles buckling as we drag 4-foot conference tables from one end of the room to the other. "I will be singlehandedly responsible for the destruction of this carpet," I say, and the room laughs in agreement. Within weeks of the start of each new semester, the students in my classes are fully aware that I'm constantly rearranging our classroom: small circular clusters of four and five desks dotting a large room, one large circle of desks around the perimeter, a u-shape facing a projected image. We move frequently between these arrangements and others, often several times in a single class session. I'm also quite fond of the chaotic jumble of bodies and desks that forms when I ask a classroom of students in small groups to abruptly turn their desks to the center of the room. Oddly wonderful things happen when students find themselves in a mass of jumbled desks. It is a profoundly egalitarian configuration.

When I walk into most classrooms, the desks are in neat and tidy rows, all facing forward so that students stare through the back of each other's heads and toward the teacher's lectern at the front. My first act upon entering these rooms is always to take down the lectern, put it on the floor, and push it discreetly into a corner. There is no front of the room in my classroom. I believe education should make space for students to take responsibility for their own learning. I believe a teacher can help facilitate that. I create configurations and invent structures, but I am not meant to be at the head of them. Through these choices, students come to realize that they are (and always are) the primary texts of my classes. In a writing class, their writing is the primary text. In a rhetoric class, our conversations about the works being studied are the primary text. In a film class, their own theories about the nature of film are the primary text. When I teach teachers, I always make clear that the aim is not to dictate "good pedagogy" but to help them engage more critically (and with the necessary scholarly tools) with the work of teaching. I assign readings and come with my own notes and expertise, but they are part and parcel with the rest. My job as the teacher is to inspire, to listen, to question, to marvel.

I design courses that ask students to look closer. The purpose of a pedagogy course, a composition course, a digital studies course, is to encourage students to engage more thoughtfully with their world and the things in it. I'm less interested in the results of this exploration and more interested in the process. Learning is an embodied practice. We learn by doing, feeling, experiencing, and interacting. This isn't to say that we don't also learn by reading, watching, reflecting, and wondering; however, I always combine these aspects of learning with their more explicitly active counterparts. I write on the syllabi for my composition courses, "Writing is a practice and a process, thus the '-ing' on the end of the word. In this

class, we will focus on the inventing, the doing, and the revising--not as much on the finishing, the being done. Writing will be a tool, a medium we use to engage our subjects, however we will also consider the nature of writing itself." I believe good writing depends upon dialogue. I believe also that the act of writing is inextricably linked to the act of reading. In my classroom, I teach close-analysis (of rhetorical texts, as well as student writing) to instill in my students an understanding that there is a careful logic to style and grammar. Good writing has a texture to it, a subtle quality that sets it apart. Writing is not something that happens statically on a page. Thus, my courses consider both the intrinsic and instrumental values of a text, what a book or essay is and what it does in the world. I encourage active learning amongst my students, even as I engage in active teaching, always innovating and pushing myself to challenge my own assumptions. I want students to think critically, to read and write playfully, to fully engage with what they see in a book, on a screen, or in the world.

When I work with teachers, I encourage metacognitive reflection and making that reflection visible to students — *talking about our teaching as we're doing it*. Learning to teach is theoretical, practical, and also affective work. And work we do together as a community of learners. It is less about static best practices and more about a recursive, adaptive pedagogical praxis. This is increasingly true as more and more of the work of teaching moves toward digital platforms. Digital platforms are not agnostic to their use. Tools are made by people, and most (or even all) educational technologies have pedagogies hard-coded into them in advance. This is why it is so essential that we consider them carefully and critically—that we empty all our LEGOs onto the table and sift through them before we start building. Some tools are decidedly less innocuous than others. And some tools can never be hacked to good use. The less we understand our tools, the more we are beholden to them. The more we imagine our tools as transparent or invisible, the less able we are to take ownership of them. And drawing students into conversations about the rhetorical impacts of our tools and technologies is key in a composition course.

None of the activities in my class are done merely as exercises. I write in my syllabi that my class is a "busywork-free-zone." I never consider myself the primary audience for student work. Instead, students work collaboratively, interacting as both readers and writers, learning as much from each other as they do from me. bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress* about her experience in graduate school, "nonconformity on our part was viewed with suspicion, as empty gestures of defiance aimed at masking inferiority or substandard work." I approach the classroom from a place of flexibility, willing to see the encounters, exchanges, interactions, and relationships that develop in a classroom as dynamic.

My classroom is a space for learner-centered community. But "learner-centered" decidedly does not mean "teacher-absent." My work is to understand learning deeply (the science, history, and philosophy of it), to help critically construct the space of the classroom (physically or virtual), to mentor, to show up myself (as more than just a facilitator), to help learners author (and co-author) their own learning, and to help teachers author (and co-author) their own teaching.