

A Statement of Teaching Philosophy by Daniel Mrozowski

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar....the hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

—Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*--

I've always taken Kenneth Burke's words as a guide for negotiating the complex histories of literary representation and the climate of higher education in the United States. As I imagine my classroom to be an introduction to both types of extended conversations, I impress in my students the skills they will need to make an intervention into the arguments and discussions that have shaped the tenor of American culture. Whether in a writing course on working in America or a literature course on 19th century fiction, I want my students to become better close readers, with an eye for rhetorical techniques, ambiguity, and creative construction. To read well takes practice – and not just practice reading. It also demands active discussion and engaged writing. To join the ongoing conversations of American literature and the American academy, my students prepare by reading, discussing, and writing about the kind of social questions that have stretched from the 19th century to our own. We might consider the role of the corporation as it appears in novels from the 1890s and documentaries from the 1980 or the role of race in University admissions and literary publishing. These conversations are not over: discussions that began long before my students entered the university will continue long after they are gone. My students develop skills to not only understand these continuous debates, but also the rhetorical confidence to help shape the progress of these conversations in the future.

In order to open these ongoing conversations for my students, we focus our own discussions on successful writing – writing filled with lucid arguments, careful evidence and expressive ideas. Whether in small group workshops, large discussions, short assignments on readings or peer responses to student essays, our class conversation circles constantly around identifying those recognizable techniques and tropes of persuasive expression. To this end, I teach and treat student-writing with the same respect I extend to the literature on my syllabus; we begin with an understanding that all writing is constructed as a series of choices, as an engagement with genre, and as a response to historic specificity. To find the seams and the joints of a constructed piece of language, we begin, in the case of fiction, with the basic building blocks of narrative, such as characterization, irony, plot, setting, symbolism, and theme, creating a common and continually evolving discourse. In the case of argumentative writing, we move from value assumptions to logic fallacies, from descriptive assumptions to ambiguity. With the creation of this common discourse based on fundamental principles, generalizations, and theories, I wish to instill in my students the skills to speak and write intelligently about successful writing.

In order to apply this common discourse, I imagine my syllabus as the creation of a classroom archive of readings. I make a conscientious effort to create an archive of classroom readings that is multicultural, across gender lines and representing a wide range of classed positions. My own research as a literary scholar has reinforced this need for an inclusive classroom canon capable of reflecting the diversity of the conversations of this University and of the wider community. Our conversations might spin from racial representation in Jack London and Abraham Cahan to Charles Chesnut's progressive vision for African-American politics to the frontier women of Willa Cather and Hamlin Garland. Whether we are discussing typicality in Henry James or dialect in Mark Twain, my classroom is always one in which the presentation of literary history remains an open dialogue between these multifaceted archives and our own continual interpretations. History, for these authors, was not assured: their time did not necessarily lead to our present. All paths

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seemed open. I want my classroom to reflect the historical variety of literary choice in voice, style and genre; I want my students to understand how deeply these choices influenced the social life of America.

The practice of reading is not, however, simply applied to the published work of the archive of the syllabus. Under the guidance of a teacher, students learn most when working with other students, gauging their own responses alongside their peers', registering the similarities and dissimilarities, and revising their own ideas in light of new assertions. In this sense, my students are also creating archives of their own work. My classroom assignments draw from a wide range of expressive genres including more traditional literary analysis to writing an introduction to a short story collection created by students. For example, my composition class will move from personal narratives about a work experience to comparison/contrast essays to an explication essay examining the fundamental skills and experiences of a future profession. As they read and reread their own archive and those of their peers, I hope to extend to them the realization that they have already made interventions into the conversation; they have made choices, offered arguments, and caught the tenor of the larger discussions of a committed and engaged member of the University and the community.