

Olivier Delers

*Statement of Teaching Philosophy*

"Because we were successful students," my first language methodology professor said, "we tend to reproduce, as teachers, the type of learning methods that have worked for us, even when we realize that they do not meet the needs of our students." Long lectures, translations, grammar... the temptation to teach as we learned is one that we have to resist—sometimes forcefully. My professor described very eloquently, I think, some of the challenges we face as teachers, both in the elementary language classroom and in culture and literature-based courses: How does a particular group of students learn a set of skills? How can we transfer what we "know" to them? What methods work best for our students and what methods do we feel comfortable teaching? At the same time, his words were also a warning, a warning against inertia, repetition and the dangers of mechanical learning. My teaching philosophy is one that focuses on change and self-questioning so that my teaching practices remain relevant to my current and future students and my approaches to learning open to suggestions and creative endeavors.

Asking for regular student feedback on the progression of my courses allows me to adapt my teaching strategies and forces me to question the organization of my syllabi. Even though talking about how much we, as instructors, learn as we teach can be cliché, I believe that change is critical to keep us—and our students—interested in what we teach. The issue is not so much teaching what we know, but making sure that the knowledge we bring fits the needs of a particular set of students. When teachers ask real questions, value their students' opinions and admit their own limitations, they model a process of discovery and critical thinking that students carry with them beyond the doors of the classroom. For example, I taught a course on globalization as a collaborative questioning of categories and values, a search that included my own enthusiasm and reservations about the expansion of markets and capital across the globe.

In my classes, I try to limit the amount of lecturing to essential background information: historical context, biographical elements and key literary concepts. Instead, I favor small-group activities that encourage students to take the texts we are reading in the directions they choose. I approach my role as a facilitator, brushing broad strokes and

letting the students build bridges between the objectives of the course and their specific interests. I believe that a sense of ownership is central to learning because it helps master the course material and facilitates the transfer of critical skills to other learning situations.

Ownership, however, does not mean that small-talk replaces thoughtful conversations. I want to keep developing strategies to ensure that students leave my classes with a solid understanding of the body of knowledge they are studying. To that end, I use "debriefing" activities, in which I ask students at the end of a class to write a summary of what concepts and ideas they found particularly interesting or challenging. I also believe that on-line blogs can be a powerful learning tool: in my composition course on globalization, these discussion groups not only gave quieter students a chance to express their opinions and concerns, but also functioned as a tool that helped me gauge my students' progress.

I include new technologies in my teaching practices, but I think that technology-assisted language learning and online course websites should be used with caution. I have been careful not to give in to new fancy tools and to use technologies only when they enhance the learning experience. For example, I sometimes steer my students' away from Powerpoint presentations unless they make them truly interactive. Rather than automated peer-editing tools, I prefer to micro-manage writing workshops so that every student gets adequate feedback on their work. Email and online responses can also be used successfully to enhance teacher/student communication. In my literature courses, I regularly ask students to send me short emails with questions they have about the reading that we have not tackled in class.

There is no language learning without an understanding of the culture in which the language exists. Similarly, it is difficult to read literary or historical texts without a certain mastery of the language in which they are written. My primary goal in the classroom is to ensure that language skills and cultural knowledge are always integrated and converse with each other.