

Teaching Philosophy Statement: The Power of Critical Questioning

I begin each quarter with the following statement: *If you leave this class with more questions than answers, this course has been successful.* The students laugh, nervously, unsure whether this is a serious statement. By the end of the first class session—after already asking and answering dozens of questions—they quickly learn just how serious I am. One of my primary pedagogical goals is to encourage students to ask deeper and more complex questions, about the course materials, about their own beliefs, and about the world around them. For many students, the process of questioning their closely-held beliefs and assumptions is unfamiliar—and often profoundly uncomfortable. In both the Feminist Studies and the Writing classroom, my primary role is to scaffold this process and to provide students with the tools, space, and support they need to ask critical questions about how our society is structured. By centering my pedagogy around questions, rather than answers, I encourage students to view learning as partial, nonlinear, and ongoing. My commitment to questioning is based on the following principles:

Questions draw attention to and disrupt traditional power relations in the classroom. Feminist Studies courses often raise difficult questions about gender, race, class, and sexuality—issues that students are repeatedly taught throughout their lives to either downplay or avoid. By centering these very topics in my syllabi, I hope to encourage students to consider *why* these topics make people uncomfortable and *how* they can communicate about their beliefs and experiences with people who are different from them. To support this level of honesty and vulnerability, the structure and values of any course must be both transparent and open to question and critique. Rather than talking about power as an abstract subject of study, I encourage students to interrogate the classroom itself as a site of intersectional power relations. For example, in my upper-division seminars about reproductive justice and sexual citizenship, I ask students to co-create a classroom contract that outlines the unique responsibilities of students, instructors, and guests during tense or emotional discussions. While the process of creating this collaborative contract requires students to shoulder an unusual—and sometimes uncomfortable—amount of responsibility, this process lays the essential groundwork for resolving any conflicts that arise later in the quarter when discussions inevitably become more fraught. Questioning these roles also reminds me that, as an instructor, I am responsible for ensuring that my course design and approach make it possible for students to participate and to

see themselves reflected in the course, for example, by ensuring that course materials are placed on reserve for low-income students and by assigning readings that represent the diverse voices and experiences of women and scholars of color.

Questions also encourage self-reliance and self-knowledge about the learning process. I feel fortunate that I was trained as a tutor before I was a teacher because this student-centered and learning-centered approach to teaching informs my teaching philosophy and practice. To encourage students to ask genuine questions, my assessment criteria always emphasize revision, improvement, and self-reflection. In my first-year composition courses, for example, I require students to meet with me to discuss a working draft of their paper. During this meeting, we discuss the strengths of the draft and work together to identify areas that need additional development and revision. I ask students to articulate *how* they approached their topic and *why* they made specific writing choices. In doing so, I encourage them to reflect on the knowledge and skills that they already possess and to find agency and self-fulfillment in revision. By emphasizing formative feedback over summative, and by giving students time and motivation to grapple with their work, I find that they begin to ask more compelling questions about their writing—moving from, “How can I get an A?” to “How can I deepen my analysis?” or “How can I better reach my intended audience?” When students learn to reflect on the steps they have taken to complete an assignment, they are better able to demystify their own thinking and to draw critical connections between their process and final product.

Finally, questions also help students develop true curiosity and to transfer their knowledge to new contexts. In both Feminist Studies courses and Writing courses, I ask students to identify topics, examples, and case studies that hold personal meaning and interest. For example, in my class on Sexuality and the State, I assign an open-ended final project that asks students to produce a written or creative project that applies the course themes to an area of interest. An aspiring teacher in my course revised a middle school sex ed curriculum to address issues of heteronormativity and racism, a future counselor created a handbook of resources for college survivors of sexual assault, and two visual artists co-created a poster campaign raising awareness about sexual asylum laws. In an end-of-the quarter evaluation, a student in this course wrote, “I love these classes because they challenge you to think and critically analyze, rather than memorize facts. Rachel especially likes to have us ask the hard questions.” Asking students to apply their knowledge to authentic and ill-defined problems requires them to transfer their

knowledge across different contexts and to engage with the course concepts in a more meaningful and memorable way.

My commitment to questioning as a pedagogical tool also means that my own teaching practices are subject to constant reflection, experimentation, and revision. Just as these courses raise questions for my students, each course also raises new questions for *me* about how to create a space for vulnerability and risk-taking, how to encourage deep reading and discussion, and how to urge students to engage and act on their knowledge. Indeed, just like for my students, leaving a class with more questions than answers is how I know a course has been successful.