

Teaching Statement

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My work as a teacher, researcher, and curator is unified by my mission to create open and inclusive learning spaces for students. As a first-generation college student, I know well the feeling “I don’t belong here.” That said, I am also an educated, white, cis-person, and thus recognize both my privilege and responsibility to be an active learner about my student’s lives, and to do anti-racist and anti-ableist work to transform the conditions that create privilege. My approach to teaching considers how identity affects learning and meaning-making. The classroom should be a space that allows learners to make personally relevant connections in their own unique ways to subjects, to discover things about themselves, and develop new ways to understand the world and other identities, societies, and communities. My own path to teaching German Studies has been non-traditional, intercultural, and interdisciplinary; my immediate paternal family are ethnic Germans who fled Ukraine during the Second World War, and I am the first person in my family to attend university. My first teaching experience was as a lead instructor for an arts program for marginalized teens. I recognized that feeling of “not belonging” in these students and saw how their self-discovery happened when we worked together with and through art to pull down false barriers and uplift the uniqueness and intellectual power of our diversity.

Today, my classroom is a learner-centered environment; my approach to teaching is informed by many years of curriculum development for individualized education as well as feminist pedagogies that value de-hierarchizing the classroom. Informed by Universal Design best practices, my teaching values individual styles—normative and non-normative—and encourages personal investment. Meaningful participation in the classroom happens when cultural, gender, and neurodiversity are all valued, when students feel they are a part of an inclusive community, open to accommodate their needs, regardless of background and with a mind towards assisting in making their own uniqueness part of a common culture. This begins on the first day of class. When I introduce myself to my students, I share my teaching and research, as well as my personal history and non-traditional academic journey. I make an effort to learn about my students’ academic and personal interests, inviting them to share freely in writing or during introductory office hour visits, the latter of which I require. Meaningful participation in the classroom also happens when students are afforded opportunities to engage directly with their particular fields of study. Recognizing each student’s unique contributions, learning styles, and needs helps me design structured, yet flexible lessons, tailored to the semester’s set of interests and the student’s own self-exploration.

It is always my goal to create an environment for collaboration, where empathy is practiced and modeled. For when students know their voices are respected and valued, they are empowered. My students are encouraged to learn by building on the knowledge and experience they bring with them to the classroom. Before I introduce new topics, I ask my students to share what they know and what they would like to learn. Interdisciplinarity is an integral component of teaching language, culture and literature courses. In my language classes I integrate cultural context with art, film, history, literature and music, as well as extracurricular activities in the community beyond the university. In my literature classes in particular, I fold historical and socio-political contexts into lessons, emphasizing the relevance the past can have for the present.

I recognize that each class has its own particular dynamic, pace, and needs. To this end, I conduct mid-semester teaching evaluations and alter my teaching accordingly, in order to best serve students’ needs of the here and now. All of these practices, informed and reinforced by the teaching workshops and diversity training I have attended, have resulted in student success. My most recent students have given me superlative instructor ratings, stating mine was the “best language class I’ve taken,” that I am “very patient with the different learning speeds of [my] students” and that I “made everyone feel comfortable having fun while learning.” These statements speak to my quality as a teacher; the subtext, however, speaks to the caring and inclusivity these students worked to create. I care a lot about my students’ academic growth and success. Important to me as well, is that students know me as an instructor who “cares a lot about [their] students.”