

Cathleen Rhodes - Personal Statement and Teaching Philosophy

My primary goals are to (1) foster intellectual curiosity; (2) promote and reward creativity; (3) implement an interdisciplinary approach that exposes students to the larger world; (4) encourage students to take responsibility for learning; (5) motivate students to engage with the community.

Early in my teaching career I was frustrated by students' inability to discern simple thematic concepts in literature or effectively persuade an audience in a short written piece. Believing these shortcomings were an indication of ill preparation, I blamed their palpable resistance on a simple dislike of learning. What I have since learned, however, is that the largest obstacle for students is often one of confidence. Reluctance – indeed, disdain for writing, reading, and research – is usually attributable to students' beliefs that they are incapable of these tasks. Thus, I use confidence building activities based on the concept of low stakes writing and sharing championed by composition scholar Peter Elbow.

I create an environment for experimentation and creativity, and my goal is to remind students, or perhaps to alert them for the very first time, that writing skills are not something one is born with; rather, a good writer *develops* skills to effectively and powerfully connect with others. Similarly, it is important to help students view themselves as readers capable of understanding and analyzing a wide variety of texts. This accomplishes what Carl Rogers identifies as essential to advancing learning in that the "threat to the self of the learner is reduced to a minimum."

I also aspire to help students become more active participants in their own learning – to, as Adrienne Rich urged students of Douglass College in 1977, claim their education. Informed by Paulo Freire's critique of the banking system of education, I envision my role as guiding students, assisting them in what I hope will be a much longer and fuller exploration and honing of their skills. My goal is to arm students with a greater awareness of rhetorical tools and methods – attention to audience or strategies for conducting research over days, weeks, and months rather than hours, for example – so that they may then use those tools to better build whatever rhetorical architectures they most want or need to construct.

My approach to teaching is decidedly influenced by feminist theory, and my pedagogical choices reflect that. The classroom is a place for shared learning, and I acknowledge that each of their individual experiences has much to teach their peers and me. I attempt to create an environment like that described by feminist scholar Barbara Omolade: “my students can bring their experience, insights and questions to classroom discussions. I assist them by adding the factual, analytical and contextual information that illuminates and expands their insights. The method works well to empower students, drawing them out, helping them to make sense of what they already know and have experienced.” Again I am reminded of Freire in that my most successful classroom experiences are ones in which we all learn something. I value techniques that stress collaboration, and I encourage the class to determine our direction when feasible. This allows me to better meet their specific needs, and it shares ownership of the classroom space. The latter increases student involvement and has been responsible for creating so many rewarding experiences. As Freire says, “for the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary, the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people.” I teach because I value this transformation and the process that gets us there.

At a reading I attended several years ago, poet Nikki Giovanni mentioned that she prefers working with undergraduate students. Just a few years out of graduate school myself, I was baffled. Who would not prefer to work with more advanced graduate students? Now, after many years of working with undergraduates at all levels, I know what Giovanni meant. I understand the joy of witnessing moments of realization, excitement, and fear. Undergraduates afford me new experiences; they allow me to see things through their excited eyes, and I welcome the fresh perspective. When I taught freshman writing I often talked to young writers about looking for the extraordinary in the ordinary, finding newness in the everyday, and though I taught them to look for it, they have helped me to actually do it. I am lucky to work with young, curious students, and I know I am the better for it.