

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), Martha Nussbaum celebrates the humanities for their ability to provide “a participatory type of education that activates and refines the capacity to see the world through another person’s eyes.” Like Nussbaum, I believe that fiction and poetry can help us cultivate the respect for other perspectives and circumstances that is fundamental to democracy, and I believe the teacher in the humanities classroom is a vital part of this process. As teachers of literature and literary critics, we make the implicit explicit: we explain how the formal features of each text communicate its argument about the world – and in the process, we explicate the act of empathy, the strange situation of hearing someone else’s words in your own voice as you read. When I do this well, I see the conversation that starts in my courses move easily beyond the walls of the classroom, and my students model this kind of participation for one another – taking up the texts’ invitation to see the world in a new way, taking seriously the perspectives of their peers, and taking chances with their own creative expression.

By undertaking this work alongside my students, I have also come to believe that empathy is underpinned by the possibility of change: not just faith that change is possible, but a willingness to be changed by the new perspectives we encounter. Below, I describe some of the strategies I use to realize this commitment to change in three key dimensions of my teaching practice:

I see the demographics of our discipline changing, and so I prioritize accessibility and equity in my course design. Early in my teaching career, as a TA Trainer at the Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation at the University of Toronto, I became curious about practical approaches to teaching for inclusion – and in the process of developing a workshop on universal design for learning, I found an approach that would become foundational to my teaching practice. In that workshop, developed with Accessibility Services, I offered new instructors reflective tools to first identify common accommodations requests in their courses, and then reimagine their design and delivery to provide a learning experience that would be more flexible, fair, and accessible to a diverse community from the outset. As I have continued to use this approach in my own courses, this exercise has also helped me imagine accessibility more broadly: in addition to drafting policies that acknowledge common obstacles to participation, it’s important to me that my courses offer clear paths to success for students who are balancing full-time work, caretaking responsibilities, and other unpredictable pressures on the time available for coursework, and do not presume that everyone has had the same chance to practice the skills for academic success before we meet.

I support my students’ efforts to make change in the communities that matter to them, and I engage them in developing course content that will serve these goals. To test the belief that, in W.H. Auden’s phrase, “poetry makes nothing happen,” my assignments offer students counterfactuals and invite them to introduce their own: How might our course have been different if we had read different texts? How should we share our research with people who are not yet in the room? So far, this approach has made it possible to include many more historically marginalized perspectives of interest to each class community, and helped to demonstrate how literary criticism and its research methods can help recuperate these perspectives on the past. By inviting students to participate in the work of defining our field and our course’s core questions, these assignments also encourage them to reflect on how, in general, they expect their coursework to be relevant to the communities they care about – and what change they want to make happen.

I am still growing as a teacher, and so I prioritize time for reflection, research, and revision after each lesson and at the end of each term. As a new instructor, I thought my job was to give students tools to succeed in university – and though I do still believe this is part of my role, I also now believe I have a responsibility to empower my students to question those terms of success and the system that defines them. I learned this from my colleagues, including the teaching assistants I have taught with for six years, but also from my students: again and again, my students’ end-of-term feedback suggests that what they remember from their English classes is not their individual successes, but the experience of learning from and with others – and so looking ahead, one of my priorities is to develop an assessment structure that can celebrate students changing their minds through just this type of collaboration.