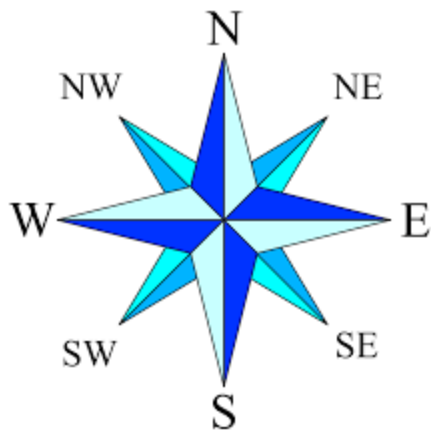


## My Teaching Compass



Sharing with students the enlightenment power of literature, imparting students with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and inviting students to experience freedom through the exercise of critical thinking is. Why. I. Teach. In return, teaching gives me something priceless: a sense of purpose. In the next ten pages, I'll reflect on my teaching practice. As you'll see, it's not a perfect practice. It has mistakes and some degrees of failures in it. But it also has many beautiful moments. This is my story in teaching. And it begins with a compass.

There's something very dynamic and kinetic in the act of teaching. Teaching is about setting in motion a shared experience in knowledge. It's a journey. It's a voyage in which the travellers, both the students and the prof, *are* the destination.

Four cardinal values orient me in my teaching activities. They form my teaching compass: 1) **students**, 2) **passion**, 3) **performance**, 4) **expectations**. In my classroom, they are my North, South, East and West.

**North.** As Sam Pickering rightly points out in his *Letters to a Teacher*, “**although the teacher’s “self” affects classrooms, students matter more than we do**”. **While I teach out of who I am, the entire exercise of teaching is not about me. It’s about the students.** It’s about the students becoming themselves, transformed versions of themselves, better versions of themselves, e-du-ca-ted versions of themselves. The point of teaching, for me, is to reveal to students another version of who they can be. Facilitating for the students this act of self revelation through knowledge gives me in return something priceless: a sense of purpose.

**South.** As far as I can remember, literature has been with me, in me, by my side, in every step of my life, since the day I learned how to read. I see the world through books, I see the world as a book. Madame Bovary, Gervaise, Jean Valjean, Rastignac cohabit in me with Atticus Finch, Holden Caulfield, Bérénice and Hamlet. Their presence fills my soul, their struggle structures my intellect. As their extraordinary destiny couldn't possibly be contained in my mere mortal soul, I must, therefore, talk about them, talk about their wisdom, their successes and their hopes. While I do also write and publish fiction, *talking* about fiction is my true calling. This where I shine. To quote Rainer Maria Rilke and his famous *Letters to a Young Poet*, the very act of teaching is what, for me, “**sends its roots down to the deepest places of (my) heart**”. Whenever I drifted away from this passion, I failed — as embarrassing memories from law school would attest... —, and every time I followed my passion, I was successful. And happy.

**East.** Doing this requires work. In *The Art of Teaching*, Jay Parini worded it well: “**A class is a performance and the teacher must (...) craft each lecture or discussion as one might craft a poem or a story**”. Students really connect with the material of a literature course (or any other types of course for that matter) when that material is performed, inhabited, dare I say: lived.

Why? **Because performance in the delivery invites students to, in turn, perform (in) their own learning.** It shows the material as a friendly and habitable place. A human place. But a performance is only as good as its content. Mere theatricalities in the classroom can never substitute for depth and meaning. Performance must only be at the service of the material and always push the progression of knowledge. It is the wind under the students' wings of learning.

**West.** I expect a lot of myself. Consequently, I expect a lot from my students. I expect efforts. Dare I say: discomfort, loss, and even vertigo. I teach by the very definition of education, from the Latin "e/ductere", literally, to "be driven out". But out of what? Out of who you are, out to another you, a you elevated by new knowledge. Meeting otherness is never comfortable or easy. But only otherness, strangeness, can educate us. I follow on this point one of my masters, Yvon Rivard, who wrote in *Aimer, Enseigner*, his Governor General Award-winning essay on education: **"We must teach what is both beyond the student and beyond us"**. My teaching methods are student-centered. But the content of my lessons is not. The mirror I put in front of my students is not a complacent one. It requires work, attention and respect. *Madame Bovary* will not flatter you. But she will educate you if you put in the work. It's tough love. But I don't teach to be loved or to even be liked. I teach so students can understand, know, respect and, consequently, love themselves.

I hold at the Committee's disposal hard copies of every source quoted as evidence in the present dossier.

**Students, passion, performance and expectations** are the **North, South, East and West** of my teaching compass. These values determine the roads I take when I build, prepare and deliver a course. From what I gather, it seems to work rather well. But not always. There's room for improvement.

## MANY ROADS BUT A SINGLE JOURNEY



### I Motivate Students with Engaging Learning Experiences

The very first words spoken out loud in the opening seconds of a literature class should be those of a writer. Not mine. Before I even say hello, I open every class by reading an excerpt from one of the stories on the program. This sends three key messages to the students: **1)** class time is precious and we shall not waste it; **2)** the literary texts are what truly matters in this experience; **3)** I believe in what I teach, I value it, and so should they.

What connects us, students and prof, is our shared desire to unite and converse about and through the material, in my case: classics of French literature. It's a communion of sorts. As a prof, I must therefore trust the material and let it "do the teaching". I select material that is academically and scientifically pertinent for the students. I also program in my courses material that I really love. Why? Because if I like it, chances are they'll like it too. Truth be told: my relationship with and towards literature is what I really teach. Students will have forgotten most of what I said about Balzac weeks after the last days of class. **But I like to think they'll remember the value of literature as a source of knowledge, solace and wisdom: they'll remember that literature is worthy of our passion.**

Motivates students' interest: **YES**

Learning experiences engage students: **YES**

*Award Criteria*



“He’s completely devoted to us, treats his job like a vocation”

“The professor is very excited to teach so I show up to every class also excited to learn.”

“He advances our intellects with his passion for literature”

“Life changing. Awesome!”

“This is one of the classes that changes your life!”

“Dr. Richer is the best prof I’ve ever had; though he’s tough, he teaches with enthusiasm and I have learned more in his courses alone than in the rest of my university classes.”

“I probably learned more in his class than I’ve learned in any other classes at UofC”

“Dr. Richer is one of the best — if not the best — teacher I’ve had”

Drawing students into the complexities of French grammar or into 19<sup>th</sup> Century French Literature is no simple feat; reading that students see my devotion to teaching and are actually “excited to learn”, hearing that students feel I’ve “**advanced their intellect with my passion**”, understanding, also, **that these learning experiences have engaged them to the point that they feel “changed”** is, well, humbling, and incredibly rewarding. Those words are my real salary, the compensation that nourishes my soul.

## **I Set Clear Expectations and I align Assessments with Learning**

From the very first minute of the first class, **I clearly establish what my expectations are for the course; my expectations of the students and the expectations I have of myself.** It’s a contract, a two-way deal. I always guarantee that I will work hard, perform, be available for help and questions, and, also, not waste a second of their time and the money they paid to sit in my course. But in return, I ask an equal commitment from them towards the course. And, as I tell them, I put the bar high. Too high in fact. On purpose. Every course should be slightly above the students’ head because education is about discovering the outer limits of what we think we know. Otherwise, why even bother? **I set high and clear standards for three things:**

**1) behavior**

**2) material**

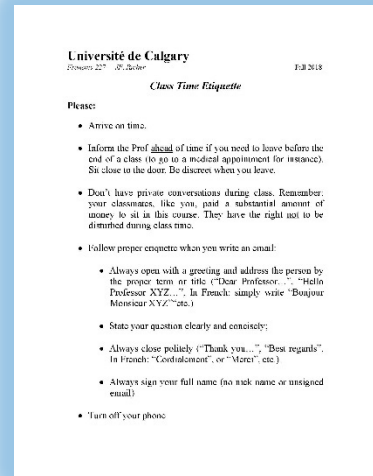
**3) evaluations.**

1) On the first day of classes, I handout a printed document titled “Class Time Etiquette”. On a single page, I detail my expectation about class attendance, late arrivals, early departures, in-class behavior and, yes, even email etiquette! I foster the value of respect among all participants, me included. This may sound a bit “old school”, but it has a calming effect on the students. It reassures them. **Teaching a course, in my view, is often an exercise in the art of communicating clearly.**

2) I will not shy away from selecting challenging texts. And lots of them. It’s not uncommon for me to program around a thousand pages of mandatory reading in a 400-level course. I allow myself to program four or five long novels (in French, a second language for most of my students) because I deeply believe that those classics have the potential to **positively enrich and change my students’ lives**, and I also

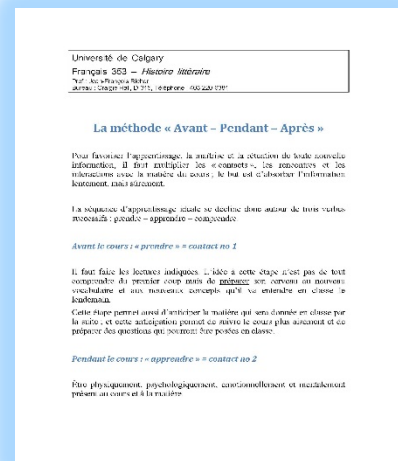
REQUIRED TEXTS	FREN 459	Fall 2018
1.	<i>Le Colonel Chabert</i> , Balzac, Honoré de; Librairie Générale française, Paris, 2003.	
2.	<i>La Dame aux Camélias</i> , Dumas fils, Alexandre; Gallimard, “Folio Classique”.	
3.	<i>Madame Bovary</i> , Flaubert, Gustave; Flammarion, Paris, 2006.	
4.	<i>Germinal</i> , Zola, Émile; Gallimard, “Folio Classique”.	

3) My evaluations are tough. There’s no other way to describe them. Too tough? Possibly. In my USRI scores, the marker about the “fairness of the evaluations” is often the lowest (as we’ll see on the next page). **But are they fair? Absolutely. Are they aligned with the courses’ content and objectives? Always.** As I explain to my students, I’m a believer in method not in talent; the *what* will eventually fade. But the *know how* will stay with you for life. **I explain to students that everything in my courses is organically linked:** readings prepare you for lectures, lectures prepare for quizzes, quizzes prepare for mid-terms, mid-terms prepare for the final be it a research paper or a formal exam. I teach students my own studying method which I call the “Before / During / After” method (in French the méthode “Avant / Pendant / Après”). In other words, I give students the why, the what and the how; the content of the course and the ways to be successful in my



Class Time Etiquette

know I will offer in return to the students **an amount of learning support that is equal to their commitment** to reading those extraordinary books. For example, I don’t have office hours. Via emails or by simply dropping by my office, **students have continued access to me from the first to the last day of each semester.**



“Before / During / After” learning method

“He is incredibly efficient and clear in his instructions and expectations; Dr. Richer pushes us to achieve our best potential.”

“He is perhaps the best prof I have had in my entire time here at the University of Calgary. He was also the hardest prof.”

“He is like no other profs. He always expects more out of his students and although he’s tough, I always learn with him the most.”

“He is the best prof I have ever had. He’s challenging, but if you put in the effort, it pays off.”

“Dr. Richer: Your classes were a real challenge. But I not only studied literature with you. I studied a world that felt both imaginary and real at the same time. You’re a professor that has completely changed the way I see the world.”

course. I propose a journey. And I give them the shoes to walk it. And walk, they must. Because I can walk with them. But not for them.

Sets clear goals and expectations: **YES**

Assessments aligned with learning: **YES**

*Award Criteria*

While students find my courses “hard” and “challenging”, **they greatly appreciate my “clear instructions and expectations” and the logical cohesiveness of my teaching.**



## I Prepare, Plan and Script Everything

I try to avoid at all cost the lure of improvisation. Spontaneity, yes. Improvisation, no. A class, as I’ve learned, is a scripted rendezvous, a communication performance that must be prepared with utmost care and precision. Why? **Because each minute of class time matters and because one must respect the contractual and staged relationship that at a certain place and time binds a group of learners to a prof.** I’ve made in the past the mistake of thinking that my natural dispositions to speak in public with ease and aplomb would suffice to give a good course. Oh, how wrong I was... In order to let my enthusiasm for the material carry my teaching, I. Must. Be. Prepared. Enthusiasm and talent alone are not enough to produce a deep, meaningful and interesting lecture. I must proceed upon a clear lesson plan, a scripted path.

Therefore, I follow three important rules in my teaching: preparation, preparation, preparation. Preparation both saves me from myself and allows me to be myself. A solid preparation will make sure that I don’t strictly plan lectures for everything, my go-to reflex for content delivery. **Good preparation will allow me to diversify my delivery methods, and, for instance, include team problem-solving exercises, guided discussions, visual art analysis segments, music or self-directed 5-minute writing exercises.** So, the moments when I do lecture will be meaningful, balanced, necessary even.

My USRI scores for the last five years attest to my discipline and my commitment to creating well-balanced, challenging and meaningful university courses:

### Summary of 2014-2019 USRI Scores

Course	“Enthusiasm”	“Evaluations”	“Overall satisfaction”
<b>FREN 459 in F14</b>	6.53	6.07	6.63
<b>FREN 565 in F14</b>	6.73	6.00	6.82
<b>FREN 691 in F14</b>	6.73	6.00	6.82
<b>FREN 599 in W14</b>	7.00	6.44	6.90
<b>FREN 399 in W14</b>	7.00	6.44	6.90
<b>FREN 353 in W14</b>	6.88	6.60	6.82
<b>FREN 691 in W17</b>	7.00	6.44	7.00
<b>FREN 565 in W17</b>	7.00	6.44	7.00
<b>FREN 459 in W17</b>	7.00	6.57	7.00
<b>FREN 353 in F16</b>	7.00	6.33	6.86
<b>FREN 227 in F16</b>	6.83	6.38	6.62
<b>FREN 459 in W16</b>	6.95	6.10	6.80
<b>FREN 227 in F18</b>	6.95	6.57	6.65
<b>FREN 353 in W19</b>	6.93	5.96	6.68
<b>FREN 459 in W19</b>	7.00	6.78	7.00
<b>Average score:</b>	<b>6.90</b>	<b>6.34</b>	<b>6.83</b>

Between 2014 and 2019, I served as Acting Head of the Department of French, Italian and Spanish (FIS) for 18 months, from January 2015 to July 2016, and I completed a 12-month Research and Scholarship Leave (RSL) from July 2017 to June 2018. Yet, I believe the fifteen different sections of courses listed above constitute an adequate and representative sample of my teaching performances.

I purposely chose to focus on three of the twelve markers used in the USRI system: my strongest, “Enthusiasm”, my weakest, “Evaluation Methods” and the marker for “Overall satisfaction”. I do not mean by this choice to diminish the relevance of the other nine markers, but **I thought it’d be a valuable exercise to briefly reflect on what constitutes the two extremities with regards to the distribution of my teaching evaluation scores.** The first observation I could make is an obvious one: the amplitude of the numerical distribution is small. Only 0.56 of a single point differentiate my lowest score (6.34) from my highest (6.90). Both results, as for the results for “Overall satisfaction”, stand distinctly above the “6.00 / Very Good” threshold and very near the top of the scale, determined by the “7.00 / Excellent” reference point. In short: those three scores reflect excellence in teaching.

Yet, the fact that my scores for “Evaluations methods” lag slightly behind the other markers push me to interrogate my methods, if not my entire way of conceiving the very principle of learning assessment. Should I maintain the bar of expectations as high as I hold it? Should I measure differently the ways students travel and progress through my courses? The numbers



indicate that my evaluation methods do work, overall. But they also indicate that some tweaking, some rethinking is required. I don't yet have an exact answer to these questions. But **what I do have, is a willingness to innovate, to try new things and step out of my comfort zone.**

This Fall 2019 (*a long time before I knew I was going to be nominated for this award, to be clear*), **I decided to rethink the ways my students were going to engage with the material.** The course, I thought, could well lend itself to such innovation. It was a new course, with a new topic, with new objectives: FREN 459, *19<sup>th</sup> Century French feminist Theories*. Yup. Given by me. A man. I have been reading feminist theories for years. I organized roundtables and research sessions in professional conferences. But I had never put the topic of feminism at the front and center of an entire course.

As **I wanted the students to develop their political voice and foster their engagement toward this topic, I decided to literally engage their actual voice in the matter:** I asked them to submit their analysis in the form of podcasts. Me, the guy who can barely operate a microwave oven, I asked my students to use a technology I don't, to be honest, completely understand. **But I decided to trust them. Because they do understand that technology and the world that comes with it.** Not all students turned in their paper as a podcast. But those who did were delighted and thrilled by the experience! Here's an example:

<https://anchor.fm/marie-pierre-houle/episodes/Sois-belle-et-tais-toi--pisode-sur-Indiana-de-George-Sand-e8eedt/a-avd9ml>



[Sois belle et tais toi! Épisode sur Indiana de George Sand by Sois belle et tais toi. • A podcast on Anchor](#)

Bienvenue à notre premier épisode! Je suis votre animatrice, Marie-Pierre Houle, étudiante de français au baccalauréat, féministe et grande amie de la littérature française et franco-canadienne. Cet épisode navigue les constructions du féminin avancées par Monique Wittig, féministe française par l'entremise du roman acclamé Indiana de George Sand.

[anchor.fm](#)

What struck me the most in this new (for me) mode of evaluation is the high level of personal commitment that I saw, firsthand, invested in the course topic by the students. In other words, **I left a place for the person to enter in the course content.** For these young men and women, the course, because, namely, of the flexibility I gave to its modes of learning output, became a place of intellectual and of personal growth. One female athlete questioned in her work the prevalent difficulty in our society to accept physical strength as a feminine trait; another student successfully explored the role of marriage as an oppressive mode of identity construction for women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century French fiction. We completed the course on December 5 in the lobby of the Faculty of Law, here on campus, in front of the beautiful sculpture dedicated to the victims of the feminicide attack at Polytechnique in 1989. My students and I read out loud, in French, a short poem followed by the full names of each of the fourteen women killed during this horrific event. **We left fourteen white roses by the sculpture. My students' voices that day went far beyond the scope of my course.**

Learners develop their critical thinking: **YES**

Reflects on teaching: **YES**

*Award Criteria*



“**Dr. Richer** is the most interesting prof I’ve had throughout my degree. [...] I’ve learned the most with him, not only school-related knowledge, but he taught us a lot about life.”

“**Dr Richer**: your classes were some of the most memorable I’ve had, both in Historic French Literature and the immersive study course in Quebec and Montreal. I will continue to use the skills that I have learned from you for the rest of my life. Thanks again for everything.”

“**Dr. Richer**, I would like to thank you for the exciting course on realism in 19th century French literature. In 20 years of university classes, I have known only one to compare with yours in depth, passion, and enlightenment. It has been a privilege to be taught by a professor who finds literature such an inspiration.”

“**Dr Richer** is by far my favorite instructor. He’s the reason I switched from an English major to a French Major.”

“**Mr. Richer** is one of (if not the) best profs in the French faculty”

Learners develop their critical thinking in my courses: reading that, through our courses, they “learn not only school-related knowledge”, but also “**a lot about life**” and that some will “continue to use the skills that **I have learned from you for the rest of their life**” is humbling and gratifying.

## I Put the Students First

Putting the student first, in my view, is about cultivating a paradox. It’s the art of being both close and yet distant at the same time. Like I always tell students on day 1: “I’m friendly but I’m not your friend”. The nuances of proximity are well represented by the French system of personal pronouns. I maintain my stance of distant closeness with the students by addressing them as “vous”, the pronoun of politeness in French, while, at the same time, using their first name. This is important. **The prof needs to be close and accessible because education is based on help, on a fundamentally altruistic gesture of giving towards the other.** But it also requires freedom of speech and the responsibility to correct, to contradict and to redirect the learner. Hence the necessity to be both close and distant. I also learn my students’ names and I always ask by which name they would like me to address them in class and how it should be pronounced. Civility is paramount in a classroom. A literature class, or any other types of class for that matter, should be a place where students can be courageous, trusting that



*Thank you cards from students*



they'll be respected and understood. In all my classes, I try my absolute best to **create a learning environment in which everyone feels welcome** and where active participation is encouraged: studying literature requires an important amount of meaningful interactions accomplished in a positive scholarly atmosphere. Lastly, **I trust my students**. When asked properly and politely, I always extend the flexibility they request in order to perform in class. The students pay me back. Always. The trust I give is returned and shared entirely.

“Mr. Richer is always a pleasure to have as a professor. I took this course specifically for him and I was not disappointed. He makes anything, from grammar to the French Revolution fun and engaging.”

“Positive classroom atmosphere where I can talk and participate without feeling so judged.”

“He’s ready to help you with anything you need. He’s incredibly passionate about his course material.”

“By far my favorite professor. He makes class interesting, so I rarely miss class.”

“Overall, Richer is one of the best profs on campus!”

“Mr. Richer knows his stuff. We’re lucky to have a prof like this at UofC”

Facilitates feedbacks:  
**YES**

Respects students:  
**YES**

*Award Criteria*



Because respect for the students is so important, it moves me to read that students **find a “positive atmosphere” in my classroom**, a place where students do not feel “judged”; students echo in their comments how I’m committed to **“help them with anything they need”**; this, again, is very rewarding. It’s at the heart of my teaching compass.

## **I Hone my skills**

Ever since my first teaching appointment in post-secondary education in September 1996, **I have maintained an ongoing reflection on my teaching practice**. Over the years I attended many teaching workshops at every institution where I had the privilege of dispensing courses (Montréal, Baltimore, Calgary). I own a small library essays on the art of teaching: Larose, Rivard, Arendt, Gusdorf, Rilke, Parini, Pickering, Todorov, to name a few, have walked along with me ever since I first opened my mouth in front of a class. As I tell students, it is one long infinite bond that ties us all together and saves us from falling into the abyss. **Teaching is about displaying our momentary role in the complicated exercise of survival. Teaching, to some degree, is always about survival, about how not to die. I also hone my teaching skills by trying to seize every opportunity to conceptualize and reflect on my practice of teaching**. For example, I volunteer from time to time at a local High School, William Aberhart, near UofC, where I teach 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature to grade 9 to grade 12 students. **These workshops force me to stretch my teaching elastic, to adapt my methods, my delivery, my rhythm. But not my passion**. That works well at every level.

Accepting nominations for teaching awards, including the present nomination for a University of Calgary Teaching Award, is another way of maintaining a current reflection on my teaching. Twice I was nominated for a **Student Union Teaching Award**: in 2014-2015, and again in 2018-2019. I was a finalist in 2015 and an award winner in 2019. Both occasions gave me ample opportunities to take stock of my methods and foundational values.

### WORDS FROM MY PEERS

“Dear Jean-Francois, Thank you for your teaching workshop yesterday. I ran into a few students after the event, and they all let me know that it was fantastic!”

— Dr Mary O’Brien, Graduate Director, SLLLC, November 2019.

“Dear Jean-François, In the penultimate version of the report, there were laudatory and critical comments about some teachers (...). You in particular have been the subject of many laudatory comments as excellent teacher and source of inspiration. It would be silly for you not to be aware of the fact that people are saying good things about you.”

— Dr Daniel Maher, Associate Professor of French, April 2017

“Jean-François is an outstanding and deeply committed teacher. His course evaluations range from 6.31 to 6.84/7. It is becoming increasingly difficult to motivate students to read literature, yet Professor Richer demonstrates a rare ability to instil in our students the passion for the field while creating a positive and respectful atmosphere to allow students to learn.”

— Dr Elizabeth Montes, Department Head, September 2010

“I remember when you explain the Guy de Maupassant short story titled “La Parure” to my grade 11 class. This experience has been so rewarding for me and the students. It was a success! I was wondering if you would like to come back to do the same lesson this Fall semester?”

— Ms. Fleur Laroque, Teacher, William Aberhart HS, September 2019.

Winning the **Student Union Excellence Teaching Award** was especially fruitful in that regard. The real benefit was to hear and meet the other award winners. What fantastic company I was in! Their stories taught me so much that night. Namely this: most great profs hardly know why they excel at teaching. They just know they must do it. Lastly, I also hone my teaching skills by giving teaching and professionalization workshops to our grad students. I gave another teaching workshop, for instance, only a few weeks ago, in November 2019. My entire workshop was based on a single principle: even as young profs, don’t be afraid to teach out of who you are. *SU Teaching Awards 2019*



**Mastering the art of motivating students’ interest, of setting clear goals and expectations, of engaging students in meaningful learning experiences while developing their critical thinking through evaluations aligned with learning activities accomplished in a respectful learning climate is a life-long process, a journey, an asymptote towards an ever-fading certitude. But as for all things that truly are worth our while — love, parenting, philosophy, good health —, in teaching, the destination is the journey.**