

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY: “Classrooms of their Own”

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Many spaces intersect in the classrooms where my students learn. They hail, as I am keen to discover, from many places and fields of study. They quickly detect (“Wait: where are *you* from?”) that I grew up in Africa and have crossed three continents in search of teaching and learning experiences to prepare me for their classroom, here and now. Whether we’ve come together to examine the drawing rooms of the 19th-century novel or the fractured urban spaces of modernist fiction, that small compartment we call a “stanza” or the courts and town halls where political rhetoric plays out, I have found my teaching to be an experience of rooms. I have developed varied approaches to bridge the spaces where we learn and deliberate. And I always aim to connect figurative rooms by finding doors between the several genres I have taught (poems, novels, drama, speeches, criticism) and by encouraging students to open the windows of their own and others’ minds.

This effort to bring together different spaces begins well before class. I ask students to write up a weekly response, which can take the form of comments that build on an email thread or a blog to which all have access, or of individual questions, passages, and figures that students offer to the class. Whether they spend time debating distinct positions on literature’s ethical role in a course on literary criticism, or selecting words used by Jane Austen to signal judgment in *Pride and Prejudice* in a course on 19th-century realism, our shared time begins on terms that my students have set in advance. I make extensive use of the blackboard to surround students with their own lists, maps, and theories, and use this array to underline the practice of literary criticism as a network of interacting positions. In more elaborate exercises to bolster critical skills, I assign students a chunk of text to annotate extensively (for instance, the “Lotos-Eaters” chapter of *Ulysses*), which allows them to experience close reading as a versatile, creative, and even fun practice before it appears in a neater form in their papers.

In the classroom, the way I foster analysis of long novels has been productively shaped by my familiarity with teaching briefer textual objects like poems, speeches, and critical essays. Whether the goal has been to offer close readings of two or three poems, or to condense into an hour complex critical works like the “function of criticism” essays written by Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and Northrop Frye, I have seen how valuable a concise approach can be. So, when the object of attention is *Middlemarch* or *Anna Karenina*, I get students to home in on crucial or unusual moments, both in the classroom and in their own reading. Recalling the rhythms of poetry can help students to see the real craft in the prose and imagery of Austen or George Eliot or Leo Tolstoy, while asking about “narrative” and “character” can illuminate lyric poetry. Bringing our small-scale discoveries together also has the key function of empowering students to take authority, to teach and surprise one another with claims for certain passages as key to our understanding. “[Daniel] facilitated discussion in such a way that I frequently learned as much from my peers as I did from him,” one student wrote in an evaluation.

I make extensive use of supplements: handouts, sample annotations, and digital experiments like visualizations of word frequencies or interactive character maps. I do this both to concretize close reading and to fill in the areas we cannot discuss in a short time, offering resources for later reference. Some of these materials explain content, like offering the philological history of something as banal as the word describing the sound a cat makes—is it “miaow” (*OED*)? or “Mrkgnao”? (Joyce)—to discuss theories about whether words and things are naturally stitched together or merely arbitrary

conventions. Pairing the many paintings in Marcel Proust with his reflections on them helps students think about the resources language has for comprehending perceptual experience. Other materials, like visualized character maps for multi-plot novels such as *Buddenbrooks* or literal maps of South African travel narratives, are meant to revivify the practice of reading so that students can map their way through texts and experience what they find, in Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase, with "mental doors ajar."

My time at the University of Heidelberg (as the inaugural director of the Writing Center in the English Department) helped me to develop techniques for assessing and strengthening students' writing skills in intensive one-on-one meetings. Although the language of instruction for these meetings was not primarily German, translation in a broader sense was crucial. Across several hundred individual consultations I came to identify various writing tics that students whose first language was not English were using to convey an idea or structure, shortcuts that marked the broad constituency of students I tutored. Realizing that we could work our way past words and patterns, I found that "writing" was to be thought of less as a second-order technique, an overlay that I could help students polish and correct, and more as a driving component of thinking and learning. I stopped fussing about overly repetitive transitions and stretched for the moments of surprise and revelation when my students and I could see their argument detached from its current form.

In all my classrooms, I now work to give students my time in a similar way. The process I adopt in approaching student writing—offering a précis of each student's argument and requiring them to do the same; lining up theses and transitions; fine-tuning the use of evidence—is at once demanding and energizing. Activities like this help us to see that getting past an essay's contingent formulations to its intrinsic argument is not always easy. Yet they also demonstrate how sensing an insight close at hand can be exciting. Moreover, they show students (and remind me) that where clear thinking goes, lucid expression follows. Together we can reach the argumentative ground that all students share, whether they're making sense of George Eliot's elaborate metaphors for human choice or pressing an aspect of Judith Butler's account of gender by turning back to Virginia Woolf. Students appreciate the work this process draws from us, in concert. Their evaluations often praise the quality of my feedback and comments, as well as my accessibility, responsiveness, and willingness to meet and work through writing: "[Daniel] was such a great resource, always there to provide support when writing a paper or challenge me to think about my observations." Even in larger courses, it seems crucial to me to maintain channels of feedback that are concrete and detailed, especially so for students who live in a world where feedback is increasingly and unhelpfully brief—a matter of numbers, letters, checks, and "likes."

One of my teaching mentors makes a point of reminding students that having a room of one's own is essential for reading and writing. When I first heard this reassertion of Woolf's famous adage, I was skeptical that the frenetic world surrounding and impinging on us really affords such spaces. Now I think something different is meant. One student comments, in an evaluation of my South African literature course: "When two hours every Monday evening in a windowless room in the basement of the Barker Center feels like an exciting and new venture into the literary terrain of a beautiful and complex nation, you know you're in for something special." Through such collective explorations students learn, from one another and from me, how to cultivate rooms inside their own minds that are receptive and responsive. These are the spaces I hope to help students furnish with things that will accompany them in a range of future endeavors.