Philosophy of Teaching

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My first day teaching Women in Literature to 40 mostly business majors completing a core literature requirement, I distributed the syllabus along with a poem. The copy (enclosed) of Mary Oliver's "Singapore," from her collection *House of Light,* rested on the desks before them, and as I slowly read it aloud I could see some of them slanting glances at each other. Asking them to listen for verb tense, to underline strong phrases and recurring images, I read it aloud again. Then we began to talk. I asked them what they noticed about the poem. I asked them what they thought the last lines meant, how trees and birds relate to the image of a woman washing ashtrays in an airport toilet. Finally, I asked them if they agreed with the twice-repeated line, "A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem": What did they want from poetry? What did they expect of literature? The conversation faltered at first, but it ultimately spilled over past the end of the class period. And we were off.

I begin my philosophy of teaching with this story because it illustrates several of my key pedagogical commitments. I understand teaching writing and literature, as I understand the texts I research, in terms of a dynamic interplay of content and form, of information and formation, of knowledge and practices. As a result, my teaching is dialogue- and process-centered, engaging students by modeling certain habits and stances and by helping them develop certain skills and disciplines of thinking. The communal exercise of reading "Singapore" set a tone for the class by engaging students in the practice of reading from the very first day; by forging a community of interpretation that invited students to share their thoughts and impressions, even when they disagreed; by demystifying explication through very concrete questions about word choice and imagery; and by highlighting questions of desire (what we want from literature), ethics (what literature *ought* to do), and aesthetics (how literature accomplishes these ends).

The skills of "critical thinking" and "clear communication" are often cited as important contributions of the humanities, and of writing and literature classes more specifically. Though I'm wary of overemphasizing the use-value of liberal arts education, I do believe critical thinking and clear communication are important results of college instruction in writing and literature. Indeed, I believe the process in which I engage students in my classes—one of careful and open reading or listening, critical and creative thinking, cogent and reasoned verbal or written response, and a habit of revision—has far-reaching consequences. In my commitment to this process I am influenced by the Jesuit pedagogical objective of forming life-long learners equipped with the skills to pursue their curiosity for the greater good. I am also influenced by philosopher Simone Weil's assertion that habits of attention developed in the classroom can translate into an almost miraculous ethical attentiveness to other human beings, as well as poet-activist Adrienne Rich's claim that the skill of imagination, exercised in the study of literature and the practice of writing, is needed now more than ever to inspire unflagging work for global justice.

Within this ethically oriented pedagogical vision, the question of which texts I teach matters along with how I teach them. Aware of the limitations of space and time, I am committed to a tenuous balance of traditional canonical texts, so important in Western cultural history, and the long-overlooked writings of various raced and gendered "others." One of my most profound responsibilities as a professor of literature and writing, I believe, is staging respectful confrontations with otherness: both the otherness of content and the otherness of literary form. I seek to develop a classroom space of many voices engaged in respectful dialogue. The voices of texts—both works of literature and theory—join student voices and mine in the dialogical space

of the classroom as I introduce students to a great variety of literature, ways of reading, and modes of response. Textual voices—be they the product of William Shakespeare or Anne Sexton or Edward Said—confront students with perhaps unfamiliar social and historical situations, ways of explaining the world, styles, and genres. As a go-between, I have the privilege of making the uncomfortable introductions and helping the texts and students get to know one another. In other words, I can increase student comfort by explaining contextual reasons for the otherness they experience in the texts, but I can also play up the confrontation by encouraging students to examine their own unacknowledged desires and fears—the places they wish to stand in poems and in life—and how such desires might shift and change. These are lessons important to both the literature classroom and the writing classroom. Thus situated, the textual voices become not only “material mastered” but also a challenging force in students' academic and socio-ethical development.

Students' development is a core objective for me as a teacher. Again influenced by the Jesuit institution where I formally learned to teach, by my long history of studying pedagogy and teaching one-on-one in writing centers, and by my own teachers who exemplified extraordinary care for their students and their subjects, I view students as whole, unfinished human beings, with bodies as well as minds, emotions as well as thoughts. As an empathetic presence during a key moment in their formation as adults, I desire to support my students as learners and as people. Offering students the close and open attention that I offer texts, extending to them the same patience that I provide my own writing in the very inefficient process of composition and revision, I seek to be a mentor as well as a teacher, a professor in the fullest sense of the term.

At the core of these commitments—to teaching process and practice, to staging dialogic interactions with otherness, to contributing to students' holistic development—is my own love. I know I take a risk in phrasing it thus, but I do *love* what I do. I love literature, from John Milton to Walt Whitman to Annie Dillard. I love writing. I love conversation, the give and take of it. I love justice. And I love teaching. I have found that in literature and composition studies my own deepest joy meets the cries of the world—this dialogue between personal delight and public pain is one definition of vocation. In researching, publishing, and teaching, I seek to say something true about how the world is, how it got this way, and how it ought to be. I do not always wish to stand in a happy place, in a poem, for the world is full of very present sorrow, and literature at its best interrogates the depths as well as the heights, but I find that another kind of happiness arises from my habits of attention to literature, to the writing process, and to students. Engaging in the practices of reading and writing is a privilege, and one I can't help but wish to share.

Singapore[1]

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something
   in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain
   rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and
   neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
   which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as
   hubcaps, with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
   and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.
If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

1 Mary Oliver. *House of Light*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. 8-9.