

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I study rhetoric because it reminds us that our circumstances are contingent, our words are partial, and our solutions are both contingent and partial. After all, “everything is never said.” Rhetoric has taught me to embrace an inevitable sense of failure, the impossibility of knowing a capital-T Truth. Moreover, it has taught me to see each contingent moment as a site of possibility, a place where carefully developed agitation can produce results. Because of my rhetorical training, my classroom is a place where students learn the skills and theories needed to make sense of and navigate contingency as it permeates their worlds.

Contingency has a leveling effect—some arguments are more sophisticated than others, but the most beautiful prose can still fall short in the wrong context. Because of this, I encourage my students to take their objects of study seriously on their own terms. Audacity is no refuge for the rhetorician. I recall the student who, with a chuckle, declared that he intended to study the Topless Pulp Fiction Appreciation Society for his semester-long Rhetoric of Social Movements project. Over the course of the class he wrote a context paper where he learned about the history of women’s struggles for bodily autonomy. Then, he wrote a textual analysis paper where he studied the texts made by women striving to #FreeTheNipple. On the final day of class that student told me that while he had initially picked his social movement as a joke, once he had scaffolded his assignments into a final rhetorical analysis, he had come to respect the movement.

Learning to interrogate contingent circumstances pushes the classroom toward difficult subjects. You can only ask “what forces are at work here?” so many times before brushing up against capital-P Politics. As much as I might hope to sanitize certain subjects, some things just stick. I use Robert Hariman and John Lucaites’ piece on the Kent State Massacre for the *pathos* lecture in my introductory Rhetoric class. I have found that when Carolina students look at photographs from that day, little time passes before they mention that the images before them mirror what they have seen on their own campus. Similarly, I open each class with “Rhetoric in the Wild,” an activity where students share rhetorical objects, ideas, or events that they’ve encountered since the last class session. Students typically discuss a current news item. Sometimes, however, Rhetoric in the Wild looks like a student describing caring for her roommate until 2am that morning because the roommate had been pepper sprayed by campus police during a protest. I have experience working with students as they face difficult circumstances in the course of their education.

I cannot safeguard my students from the world around them, nor can I teach rhetoric without a little wildness. Because of this, I view the classroom as a place to critically interrogate, rather than shy away from, the political. In the midst of a multi-year crisis over a Confederate monument on UNC’s campus, I have encouraged students to pursue better understandings of the circumstances at work. I gathered primary documents around that monument, grounding lessons throughout the semester in object study that allowed students to pick apart different aspects of histories of race on their campus. Mindful of the seriousness of the subject, I urged students to direct their attention to the workings of texts in order to interrogate their beliefs. In evaluations students praise my selection of examples and objects in class as relevant to their lives, and affirm that my classes have taught them how to better handle complex and delicate issues without devolving into shouting matches.

Encouraging my students to center class assignments and conversations on the issues that matter most to them has also produced some growing pains. I think of the student, a young white man, who insisted that he *needed* to debate affirmative action in my introductory debate course. On the day of the debate, he then passionately declared that affirmative action would cause such deep and abiding resentment in white people that they would “start the race war and kill all black people.” This student was aghast when his classmates expressed that his statement offended them. Doubly so when they refused to take seriously “the race war,” as he later referred to it, as an argument. Being a white northerner in the South has taught me that educators rarely have the luxury of being just offended. I defused the conflict by moving the conversation to a one-on-one meeting where I let the student express his feelings. In our conversation I focused on hearing this student. Listening without endorsement. I met regularly with that student for the remainder of the semester. Because of our conversations, he told me he felt heard, and later apologized to his classmates. As an educator I put in the work required to make sure that my students feel comfortable learning together, even when they bring radically different worldviews and life experiences to my classroom.

Pushing students to examine the issues and arguments that matter most to them allows them to translate course concepts into personal growth. I pride myself on what I take as the central lesson of my upper-division Argumentation course: critique does not require ill will. My students spend the semester considering the arguments on offer by an organization in which they are an active participant, developing a critical intervention into the rhetoric of their organization. In one of my favorite final projects, a student mentioned that the final oral presentation for the class was the second time he had presented his case, because he had already successfully made the case to the leadership of his Narcotics Anonymous group that they needed to rearrange the advertising and leadership structure of the organization. Throughout the semester he built the capacity to simultaneously articulate the good Narcotics Anonymous had done for him while still elaborating a clear alternative vision for how the organization could conduct itself. My students learn the skills required to engage with what is most important to them, and apply course concepts to produce work that fits their needs.