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Teaching Statement

I approach teaching as activism. As a feminist instructor, my highest goal is to engender free thinkers: students who actively critique the ideologies, state policies, and cultural norms that shape their bodies, lives, communities, and world. I aspire for students to see the world through critical eyes long after they forget specific details of my class. I seek to spark this inquiry through a dynamic personal style, rich class discussions, captivating readings, and experiential projects, while constantly sharpening my approach with student feedback. I also center a feminist ethics of care in my teaching, always taking extra steps for my students' wellbeing.

All facets of my teaching incite students to mobilize new knowledge into critical awareness and concrete action. I want students to leave my courses with the desire and skills to change their society—not only through legal advocacy (which few may pursue), but also through personal, daily conversations: educating their children, friends, and roommates about topics like rape culture, income inequality, the prison industrial complex, and how to use a condom. Likewise, I hope this class will help students successfully navigate the oppressive structures that daily threaten their safety, health, pleasure, and happiness.

My favorite practice for pursuing these goals is assigning experiential capstones at the end of each course: a Community Action Project and an Activist Art Project. For the Community Action Project, my Gender, Sex, & Power students must volunteer with a social justice organization or attend a social justice event of their choice, then analyze their experience through the critical theories we have learned all semester. For the Activist Art Project, my Popular Culture students create group artwork such as slam poetry, music videos, or feminist magazines to speak out against oppression. All groups then present their art in class; these presentations make for an electrifying intellectual and emotional experience.

Students report that these capstones bring home all our theoretical lessons in a hard-hitting way and spark their commitment to action. For example, one student wrote by email that “I LOVE how we ended the semester with activist art...It made me feel like I was putting this knowledge to purpose, and really making a small impact in the world.” Meanwhile, for her Community Action Project, one student helped the Mid-Ohio Workers Association inform impoverished members about free medical care. As she wrote, “I had never really considered that some people didn't have access to proper medical care before coming to MWA.” She then pointed out that most people seeking MWA's help were women and/or people of color, and she explicitly linked

this fact to theories of systemic oppression that we had learned in class. She further wrote that she will “continue to work with organizations like MWA,” while pursuing “a change within federal and state legislation” because “it is the powerful and privileged’s responsibility to help the powerless in order to work together to end oppression.” Reading this essay was a very proud moment for me.

As these statements suggest, I know that I accomplish my teaching goals thanks to dozens of student emails, Carmen posts, SEI comments, and personal reflections each semester. For example, one of my students last semester posted that “I find myself seeing life through a completely different lens than I ever have before, and questioning everything. I find myself sharing the information with everyone. I find myself wanting to change this world and this society.” Another wrote, “with these newly developed thinking skills, I want to make a positive impact in the lives of those around me.” This exciting feedback shows me that I really do convey content and instill new skills effectively.

Excitement, humor and passion define my teaching style. I love teaching, I want my students to love learning, and I believe rigorous inquiry thrives in an upbeat environment. Many topics demand solemnity—however, I want this knowledge to catalyze social change; I want students to believe (as I do!) that change is possible. To nurture this optimism, I strive to animate the classroom with warmth and enthusiasm. I also value humor for its power to “recharge” students after a sober discussion and to grab their attention while I explain new concepts. Therefore, as I guide my students through controversial topics and challenge their core assumptions, I balance serious moments by finding times to smile, crack wise, and integrate quirky (but relevant) Internet memes. Students laugh and smile often in my class, and I believe this laughter actually helps them focus and learn.

Students frequently mention how much they value these pedagogical strategies: For example, in a midsemester survey, student comments included, “I really appreciate what you do to keep the class light and fun, even though we are talking about some heavy real stuff;” “Your teaching has not one dull moment;” and “You make the room so comfortable to open up in!” Likewise, one student posted on Carmen at the end of last semester that “I left the class feeling excited and inspired...I felt optimistic about feminism, instead of sad about oppression.”

My top approach to learning is rich class discussion rooted in daily readings. I strongly believe that discussing the controversial issues we broach brings students to a new critical awareness about oppression and injustice, and can especially break through the blinding effects of privilege—for example, when male students grapple for the first time with the reality that their female classmates face daily street harassment and fear of assault. However, peer-to-peer discussion on such issues requires careful preparation to prevent unconstructive anger or arguments, as I have learned from my first teaching experiences. To cultivate dynamic dialogue,

I always inform new students that our classroom is a “brave space;” a space to not only voice our ideas, but critically debate them while fully respecting each other. I stress that all of us, including myself as the teacher, must expect that others may challenge our ideas, and that this challenge is positive and productive because it prompts us to deeper analysis: Even moments of challenge or discomfort can hold rich learning potential when we remember that we are collaborating to learn, not fighting to “beat” each other in debate.

To enact this brave space, I collaborate with students on ground rules like “critique ideas, not people,” and “never interrupt other speakers.” Of course, I intervene as necessary to reestablish these guidelines throughout the course. Through this “brave space” paradigm, students begin to speak their minds and proactively scrutinize all types of norms and assumptions, rather than passively accepting them. I also see students hone vital skills in self-reflection, oral expression, and respectful dialogue across disagreement. On a more basic level, full-class and paired discussions allow students to grapple with new concepts, connect them to previous lessons, and apply them to life outside the classroom. Many students report that our discussions are their favorite part of the course; for example, comments on a midsemester survey included “you are honestly the best discussion facilitator I have ever seen” and “I like the tone of the class. We are open to have our own opinions, even if they are not the same everyone else’s.”

I fuel these discussions with carefully chosen readings and brief theoretical explanations that deliver core concepts, facts, and analytical tools. In class, I complement these readings with short conceptual explanations crafted to engage students with relevant humor, movie clips, art, and popular culture references. These strategies make it easy for students to connect deeper theoretical concepts with practical, daily examples. Further, I invite students to co-teach by posing questions and typing their answers into the slides (i.e., “What transgender characters have you seen on TV?”). Co-teaching encourages students to invest in the course by showing them that their voice is valued. I also prize bodily motion, and frequently use activities like the “Privilege Race” (see Instructional Artifact) to translate abstract ideas into concrete, embodied knowledge. During class, students also often view and verbally analyze popular culture texts, such as movie trailers and music videos, that exemplify our various topics.

As I nurture these skills and insights, I always center a feminist ethics of care. I strive daily to show my students that I care deeply not only about their intellectual growth, but also their physical and emotional wellbeing. I strongly emphasize to students that they can use their new knowledge to protect their own health, safety, and happiness, and to look out for their loved ones as well. As one key example, students learn to recognize the “cycle of violence” common in domestic abuse scenarios, so they can better recognize and escape abusive relationships in their own lives. Further, if students seem stressed or preoccupied, I take the time to ask them how they are; when students miss class, I email them to ask if all is well; if students share personal struggles—as they often do in classes on gender and sexuality—I gladly lend an ear and connect

them with the resources they need. When I see students struggle with class concepts, I also reach out to invite them to office hours for clarification

I am honored when students write on my end-of-semester evaluations that they have sensed and valued my caring. For example, in my first SEI as a TA, one student wrote, “Jon took a lot of interest in every one of his students. He always checked to make sure that we understood the material and would email us to answer our other questions.” Another student who had faced numerous personal obstacles recently emailed me to say, “Thank you for everything you have done for my during last semester. Not only are you an amazing instructor but you are a fantastic human being as well.”

This student feedback means the world to me, and more generally, I aim to constantly strengthen my teaching through self-reflection, student feedback, and outside observation. For example, I solicit anonymous feedback from students through written surveys, and always invite them to speak with me if they have concerns about the class or ideas to enrich it. Survey questions include “What’s working well for you?” and “What changes would make class more clear, effective, and comfortable?” Whenever students meet with me for any reason, I also 4 informally ask them if they have any thoughts on how our class can become more effective and engaging. In addition, I invite my fellow instructors and department chair to observe my teaching so I can enhance it with their insights.

Seeking feedback this way not only improves my teaching, but shows students how much I value their opinions, which in turn motivates them to engage with my courses. For example, one student wrote on a mid-semester survey, “You take everyone's opinion and consideration into mind and I love this. Some professors would take the opinion and probably do nothing about it. This is my favorite class by far and I am learning more and more every day when I thought there was nothing else to learn and I thank you for that.” As this feedback reflects, I seek every opportunity to enrich the experience that I build with students. My goal is always excellent, cutting-edge pedagogy, which I hope will improve my students’ lives and incite them to change their world.