

Philosophy of Teaching, Learning, and Diversity – William Lewis – Fall 2019

My teaching philosophy is deeply intertwined with interests in digital culture, participatory politics, collaborative arts making, and the ethical position of critical posthumanism. The posthumanist position is one in which one strives to question and destabilize established hierarchies to encourage diversity, community building, and a greater connection to multiple forms of personal agency. Using this philosophy, students are led to ask why and how so that they may develop pathways between knowledge, compassion, and action. This method of guiding is at the heart of liberal arts education where students are led to become model citizens through art versus simply cogs in the machine of artistic production.

By completing a Graduate Certificate in College Teaching at CU Boulder, I gained exposure to pedagogical models that support an emphasis on active learning and Howard Gardner's educational theory of multiple intelligences. Educational Psychologist Larry Rosen argues that the makeup of digital-born learners requires multiple forms of engagement that mirrors their constant state of multitasking with media. One focus of my pedagogy is better understanding the cultural and social milieu of digital-born students by implementing the tools and logics central to their ways of understanding the world. This includes encouraging participatory dialogue, incorporating digital humanities methodologies, interpersonal communication using digital and non-digital interaction, and artistic creation through collaboration.

Thinking through "the digital" also means understanding the uniquely participatory nature of contemporary society. Students learn through doing and collaboration in course lessons which are regularly divided into equal parts discussion, lecture, and active participation. Examples include: using handheld devices to conduct interactive quizzes and snap polls; utilizing online blog sites and discussion forums for writing assignments; engaging the students in active flipped-classroom learning; and focusing on collaboration that requires rethinking institutionalized hierarchies. Technology used properly helps instill compassion and careful listening, leading to thoughtful critical dialogue both in and out of the classroom.

In large lecture style courses like Intro to Theatre or Intro to Fine Arts, digital devices engage the students in interactive ways of learning utilizing tactics of game play. These digital interactions are followed by discussion and short written assignments to guide the students towards thoughtful critical thinking skills. In upper-level and graduate survey courses such as American Theatre or Theatre History, the students create an ongoing open-access digital dossier based on artistic and critical readings. A recent example of a class using this digital writing tool was the site <http://americancharacter2017.tome.press/>. The tool gives students freedom of expression in ways found less intimidating and more thought provoking than traditionally measured in-class participation. The sites replace quizzes and tests, instead emphasizing the individual voice of the student, and introducing the necessity of ethical and respectful discourse through shared written language. The open-access nature of the tool and process of transparency allows more thoughtful and respectful dialogue among the students while encouraging them to better understand multiple sides of an argument. They become moderators and proponents of critical thought through the process.

Fostering an ability to truly listen is another practice used in the classroom to encourage equity. Students are led through collaborative and discussion-based learning. Through these discussions, students learn how to navigate difficult topics concerning historical differences. In previous courses this has led to students gaining a more holistic understanding of their own personal stakes in community engagement. Assignments are often structured around collaborative assignments that emphasize a horizontal power structure where students have

Philosophy of Teaching, Learning, and Diversity – William Lewis – Fall 2019

equal agency to use their own creativity and requires a mode of cooperation where there is no individual leader.

Granting agency through dialogue and listening is also an important part of the performance/practice-based courses taught. In courses such as Acting or Directing, students maximize their creative talents through participatory exercises and critique each other's work. This teaches them the necessity of careful observation and listening while allowing dialogue that is both critical and respectful. Devised and collaborative processes are often included allowing students an opportunity to actively contribute. In Directing, collaboration also serves to break down hierarchical ways of thinking and communication. This leads to richer and more interesting experiences for all involved.

At the center of my pedagogical, research, and artistic philosophy is a belief in community building that supports engagement with issues of alterity, difference, and privilege, emphasizing interconnectedness. True commitment to diversity in education requires allowing everyone a voice and learning how to carefully listen to cultivate constructive dialogue. My approach is based on a commitment to understanding how difference manifests and navigating the ways in which diversity and change can be assets for strong social ties, inclusion, and equity. This falls in line with my attitude to the world; treat everyone with respect, allow those not traditionally given a voice the microphone, step-back and think about one's own actions, and never stop listening and learning.

My background as a first-generation college student from an economically lower-class single-parent family has significantly influenced this approach. In the multiple moves growing up, I encountered many different communities with radically different beliefs and expectations. This helped me learn to appreciate difference and assimilate to changing values concerning race, class, wealth, culture, and heritage. This background of economic instability, constant change, and cultural adaptation made me less aware of the privilege I have as one identified as white and male. My undergrad (U. Memphis) and master's (Hunter College) institutions primarily served students from urban environments that were naturally diverse. Upon moving to Boulder for the PhD, a city and campus where cultural diversity is severely lacking, I began to fully understand how my own privilege requires me to use my background as a way of encouraging inclusion and equity in the classroom and society at large.

When creating syllabi, I work to deconstruct engrained hierarchies. This includes restructuring reading lists in survey courses and giving students more agency and authority in practice-based courses. In survey courses this requires expanding viewpoints to focus on the multiple world "histories" of theatre and performance. Examples of this include restructuring the canon and diversifying the voices heard in the previously taught Introduction to Theatre and American Theatre. Incorporating theoretical, practice-based, and aesthetic vocabulary from cultures in both the Global North and Global South are crucial to understand a holistic understanding of the cultural influence of theatre. In the American course, plays from authors such as Cherie Moraga, Susan Lori Parks, Luiz Valdez, Rajiv Joseph, and Young Jean Lee are offered to reconstruct a history of American Character often told primarily from the perspective of those with privilege. These authors are then read alongside multiple theorists and cultural historians to show how American theatre fits within a worldview that has become increasingly global. These courses serve as templates for the way I teach theatre history and reflect my commitment to multiple forms of diversity and educational equity.

Philosophy of Teaching, Learning, and Diversity – William Lewis – Fall 2019

My most recent faculty position Texas State allowed me to return to an environment with rich diversity. As a minority-majority campus and Hispanic serving institution, I was blessed with the opportunity to work with students to highlight the stories and experiences of those who've been historically underrepresented. I also had the opportunity to with a program devoted to supporting first generation students. Working in that type of environment is ideal for me based on my own background and will allow me to continue to foster my desire to create coalitional thinking and poly-vocal community building. I will focus on connecting with the campus through my primary focus on issues of social class and economic inequality. Beyond the theatre classroom, this means engaging in outreach with the local community and the larger campus population.