TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse.
Fail worse again. Still worse again.

Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

The first day of each new semester never quite goes according to plan. My students seem either nervous with excitement or guarded with skepticism, and before I've finished familiarizing myself with the classroom's audio-visual equipment I can look out onto a sea of unfamiliar faces and know—just *know*—what kind of semester I'm in for. Course materials are inevitably "still on order" at the campus bookstore, and I'm already anticipating the confusion that will result when my students and I begin negotiating amendments to the syllabus's course calendar. I fumble and fumble with the shrink-wrapped package of index cards I've brought for our opening activity, eventually pawning the task off on a nearby student who seems (I think) to have been one of the "nervous with excitement" crowd. As I write the day's agenda on the white board, I notice that my handwriting has atrophied over the break and manage to misspell "Intorductions" and "Rhoterical" before catching the mistake as I walk away from the board. And just when it seems things can't get any worse, the classroom's one eraser hasn't been cleaned in months, leaving a near-permanent record of my misspellings on the board in the form of long, black streaks in the middle of the now-fixed words "Introductions" and "Rhetorical."

In short, the first day of each new semester *reminds me that I'm human*, that I'm liable to make mistakes no matter how thoroughly I've planned and prepared for that first day in the classroom. And rather than running from my humanity, or trying to somehow hide it from my students, I own these mistakes in front of the class, using them as a catalyst for discussing the messy, chaotic kinds of learning I want to foster during our time together. In every course I teach, my core pedagogical philosophy remains the same: to create a learning environment where mistakes and missteps are treasured as *kairotic* moments in which knowledge is generated, questioned, and revised. And over the course of my eight years in the high school and the university classroom, I've learned that such an environment is most successfully fostered when my teaching is grounded in the following three principles:

The process of wrestling with difficult material is fundamental to the development of a vibrant classroom learning community.

I regularly ask students to embrace the challenge of a dense reading assignment or an open-ended essay prompt—and then devote significant class time to the "processing" of this challenge via individual journal responses, small-group conversations, and whole-class discussions. Whether we've just read Kenneth Burke on the value of "literature as equipment for living," Michel Foucault on the "author function," or excerpts from Mina Loy's long poem "Songs to Joannes," students are repeatedly encouraged to reflect critically upon their encounter with both the *content* and the *experience* of the assignment. And once we establish a communal ethos built upon the understanding that it's okay to be "wrong" as long as everyone (instructor included) is contributing to the classroom conversation productively, a sense of group solidarity develops that supports and motivates students as they attempt similarly challenging assignments in the future.

Students must be given ample opportunities to construct, to discuss, and to re-construct their experiences with course texts and assignments.

In order to foster this nascent learning community, students need to feel a sense of ownership regarding the reading and writing assignments I ask them to complete. Toward this end, my classes are structured so that students are *reading*, *writing*, *speaking*, *listening*, and *viewing* nearly every day. For especially difficult readings—like chapters from David Foster Wallace's novel *The Pale King*—this multimodal approach helps students move away from their initial anxiety about "what the text means" and toward a fuller appreciation of how the text is interacting with them as readers. For challenging writing assignments—like a small-group Campus Improvement Grant (CIG) proposal—these various activities encourage students to imagine their world more complexly as a way of generating final products that reflect this complexity back to their intended audience. As we spend each class moving between activities that engage these five modes of learning in one way or another, my goal is for every student to feel that s/he has been given multiple chances to take an active role in the class's collective understanding of course texts, materials, and assignments.

Teaching is not about content. Teaching is about *relationships*.

None of this works, however, if my students remain unconvinced that I care about them as human beings, as individuals with unique histories who've somehow found their way into my classroom. So I ask them about their weekends. I ask them about their families. I ask them about the bottles of Mountain Dew they drink at 8:00AM and the boyfriend now serving in the military overseas. And then I make a concerted effort to weave these conversations into my mini-lectures and our class discussions, using them to highlight, wherever possible, the degree to which their experiences evince powerful similarities to those of a novel's protagonist, a poem's speaker, a rhetorician's theory, an author's biography, or perhaps even their instructor's own life. When students begin to understand that the class is really about them, and not about abstract concepts or historical time periods, they become much more willing to engage with course materials and embrace *kairotic* moments whenever and wherever they might appear.

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As the first day draws to a close and my students file out of the classroom, I replay the five minutes before class on my mental DVR and (usually) have a good laugh at how insignificant that initial "chaos" already seems. With the benefit of similar hindsight in my career as an educator, I've come to understand that I started becoming the teacher I am today the moment I realized that students don't really care how much I know about literature or rhetoric, or how smoothly I can set up the classroom for them on Day One of a new semester. They only care that I seem eager enough to learn more about these disciplines with them, and humble enough to embrace those moments when I don't have all the answers.