

Teaching Philosophy

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****Note:** This statement articulates my teaching philosophy and anchors it to my WRAC courses.

My teaching is guided by a deeply situated or contextual framework that locates writing in the context of other languages, modes, and globalization. This pedagogical frame is closely aligned with culturally relevant and translingual pedagogies in its challenge to “deficit” and interference models that devalue students’ home languages and literacies (viewed as interfering with learning). Grounded in these asset-based approaches, I move towards a dynamic understanding of language that conceptualizes students’ (often) hidden literacies as resources for teaching and learning. Central to this orientation is a reworking of teacher and student roles through the cultivation of a learning environment that shifts the teacher from the role of sole authority who pours fixed content into empty containers (i.e., students). Instead the aim is to position the students as authorities with their home languages and literacies as a means to develop critical perspectives on language and literacy. Further leveraging students’ funds of knowledge, I attend to multimodality with a conception of writing as one resource within a wider semiotic or rhetorical repertoire, including writing, talk, image, and gesture. In this fashion, my teaching framework gestures towards a broader and more holistic approach, with attention to multilingual (or translingual) and multimodal (or transmodal) activity.

Broadly, one key learning objective in my writing classrooms is to cultivate rhetorically and culturally dexterous students able to traverse local, national, and international boundaries in the context of 21st century globalization. Through studying and engaging with other languages and cultures, my cross-cultural pedagogy is aimed at helping students to develop a “bifocal perspective” as they learn to see the world from multiple points of view: i.e., understand how global diversity emerges within and across cultures. The intention is to equip students with the tools to denaturalize (defamiliarize) dominant ideologies, e.g., institutional discourses, national narratives, and monolingual norms that have informed many traditional writing classrooms. In this fashion, my teaching is aimed at helping to create globally responsible citizens (or citizen-scholars) with the rhetorical tools to interact across various cultural groups and tackle issues and problems whose issues cross transnational borders. Shifting from static or fixed conceptions of language and culture, I further try to foster a sense of ways these intersecting areas are dynamic, contested, and changing. Hence the aim is not just to learn about world languages and cultures, but also of ways to approach, reflect on, and engage with them.

In addition to helping students cross transnational borders, I am also focused on helping students to traverse academic and disciplinary ones. As mentioned, I believe that all language and communicative practices are deeply contextual, and this situated framework shapes my teaching, curriculum design, and approach to writing across the disciplines. Drawing on Bartholomae’s notion of inventing the university, this stance challenges deficit models by resituating many problems with student writing as difficulties stemming from disciplinary enculturation. Later work in composition has complicated this analysis, as we now understand the university not as a monolithic entity with a fixed set of rules, but rather as a complex array of dynamic and changing practices. Foregrounding these tensions can help us to better understand the complexity of the tasks we are asking students perform, a stance further complicated for multilingual and non-mainstream students. This orientation furthermore helps us to work with students across the disciplines, and to understand the ways that each disciplinary community is invested in its own specific ways of making meaning. It finally allows us to move towards teaching courses beyond the walls of the university, and into communities where we can engage students in community-based and global forms of inquiry.

Technology plays an important role in all of these moves. In considering teaching with new media and technology, I begin by recognizing that new media is ancient in many key respects, and in fact all

human activity is mediated by tools. Pencils, blackboards, and writing itself are all technologies that mediate language, thought, and action. These technologies over time have become sedimented into everyday mundane and routine activity, and part of what we perceive as our natural environment and woven into our habits of mind or “black boxed” (to use Latour’s term). In this sense, one key aim in teaching writing and new media is to denaturalize the everyday and mundane technologies that mediate our everyday activity, and to encourage students to reflect (and for me to reflect as a teacher) on the ways that all technologies (including language as technology) offer affordances and constraints on learning and literacy practices. Locating these issues in the context of globalization, I focus on the ways new media and technology are enabling transnational flows of signs, symbols, and media across borders, and how these processes are remixing everyday languages, literacy practices, and identities.

In more pragmatic terms, this orientation means focusing on everything from texts books to text messages and street signs to gang signs. In making this move, I take a rhetorical approach to teaching writing and new media, and encourage students to ask questions such as, When does a visual work best? When does a written text? When is a combination of the two mediums most effective? What medium is best for communicating one’s message? For instance, should one design a web page, paper document, email, chat, or multimedia presentation? In this manner, my aim is to push students to think about their rhetorical situation. In getting students to approach writing as design decisions, I furthermore try to encourage them to think about the wider contexts in which writing and design circulate. This includes (in professional writing courses) usability testing texts in order to press students to think about the ways that readers and users construct meaning from multimodal objects. It also entails situating the study of literacy within the context of wider transnational flows and 21st century globalization, with attention to remixing and mediation of texts and textual practices.

Underlying these moves is an effort to develop students’ meta-awareness of language and literacy practices so that students can take ownership and control over their own writing processes and rhetorical decisions. Operationalizing this post-process and student-centered approach includes acting as a sounding board (particularly in one-on-one settings such as student-teacher conferences); providing non-judgmental forms of feedback; using self-assessments (e.g., writing reflective papers; co-constructing the criteria used to evaluate assignments); employing the assumption behind error analysis that even when students make “mistakes” there is a certain logic to those mistakes; conceptualizing response as woven into the fabric of the class (not simply at the end); developing a language to describe and talk about student writing and thinking; and understanding the processes we are asking our students to engage in. Finally, core to this approach is a deep understanding of ways students’ histories, languages, and socialization mediate their literacy practices and learning. As educational scholar Guofang Li (1996) argues in her study of a Chinese international student community, teachers need to find “effective ways to collect student social and cultural data outside school, as we cannot teach when we do not know who we are teaching” (211). As a teacher-researcher (for me, areas inextricably intertwined), I am continually engaged in this process.

Enacting Culturally Relevant Pedagogies in WRAC

In this section, I outline in a more concrete fashion how this his cross-cultural approach has informed my teaching of first year writing, professional writing, and a graduate seminar. I here wish to extend the discussion to foreground more about my approach and provide evidence on the ways it encourages students to develop rhetorical and cultural dexterity.

Most significantly, this culturally relevant pedagogical approach has informed my teaching in the WRA 1004 Preparation for College Writing (PCW) course. The course is comprised of a wide range of students, including Koreans, Indians, Africans, African-Americans, and a large number of Chinese international students. I focus on activities and assignments grounded in exploring students’ linguistic and

cultural differences: e.g., interviewing each another about linguistic and cultural differences; writing border-crossing narratives (stories of linguistic and cultural encounters with difference); making screen recordings of students' multilingual writing processes while sharing with the class; bringing in key terms from students' home cultures while translating them for "outsiders"; remixing assignments in the form of comics. Informing my pedagogical approach is my research on the Chinese student population. Drawing on this scholarship, I frequently bring in examples from students' lives (e.g., Chinese student magazines, memes, text messages) as a means to engage with, discuss, explore, and illustrate key themes. Related to the deep intersections between my teaching and research, I have been working with Chinese international students for the past several years as part of the CAL Undergraduate Research Initiative (URI), with intensive weekly meetings and mentoring. Exploring the extracurricular literacies of the Chinese international student population, my undergraduate research assistants have learned about data collection and academic research, while I have learned much about the Chinese international students' literacy practices and lived experiences. In this fashion, I have been intensively engaged in developing a better understanding my students' literate lives in academic and non-academic contexts (and the intersections between them).

This translingual approach has further informed a frequently taught honor's section 195H Writing Ethnography. Guiding the curricular design is the notion that language difference does not only happen across transnational borders, but also within them. In the course, the students draw on their own lives, experiences, and communities, as they engage in their own semester-long ethnographic projects. As part of this work, they bring in recordings, transcripts, still images, videos, field notes, and artifacts from their literate lives. There have been a wide range of ethnographies, including of an international student from the United Arab Emirates who examined the ways the trope of the collective informed everyday interactions, world views, and beliefs of family and friends. Though this course was in 2015, he subsequently contacted me of his own volition in 2017 to tell me of the course's impact on his thinking, along with a request to do an ethnographic project for the CAL-URI. I have had similar emails from other students, including one who conducted an ethnographic research project on his own student startup. The following is from his email:

I was a student in your WRA 195H class in the Spring Semester of 2015. I wanted to let you know that your class remains one of the most enjoyable and stimulating courses I have taken at Michigan State.

During the semester, I prepared an ethnography relating to startup culture. Your class enhanced my ability to think introspectively, and also encouraged me to take interest in unfamiliar cultures. For that, I thank you.

I include this email to suggest that at least for a portion of the students (local and international) this cross-cultural approach succeeded in connecting writing classrooms to their everyday lives. I further extended this approach into the Professional Writing program in WRA 260 Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Culture where students (in similar fashion) examined language and literacy practices in the context of their lived experiences. The class included a culture jamming assignment in which students were invited to disrupt everyday social scenes, with the aim to investigate how everyday activities shape and are shaped by wider social, political, and historical contexts. This focus is relevant to professional writers and communicators as they move in and across community and business contexts. This approach further informed the design of WRA 320 Technical Writing in which students had the opportunity to write and test documents for "clients" such as the Technology Innovation Center (TIC), an open workspace on Grand River Avenue serving the local tri-county area. Central to the course was sensitizing students to ways that wider institutional and social contexts mediate everyday workplace literacies.

Finally, this translingual approach informed the design of a graduate level course AL 891 entitled Reassembling Composition: Studying Language and Culture across Local and Global Contexts. The course was intended to introduce students to theoretical and methodological frameworks for teaching and researching language in the context of globalization. In an effort to enact and interrogate core concepts in the course, students were invited to “code mesh” in their own weekly response papers by incorporating other languages, signs, and symbols. Moreover the students’ different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Bolivia, Iran, America) served as a focus of the course with opportunities to bring in semiotic and cultural artifacts for analysis from their own lives and research interests. This included analysis of digital artifacts and social media practices in other languages and from other areas of the world. In a section of the course on linguistic and semiotic landscapes, moreover, one student photographed Arabic on storefront signs located on Grand River Avenue with attention to ways that they indexed translocal identities. I additionally brought in key examples from my own work in relation to Israel and China with the students asked to read a manuscript (along with the reviews) and chapters of a book in progress to examine wider issues related to knowledge construction and the publication process. My work in this area furthermore extended into other contexts, such as a graduate student research cluster on globalization where these issues were further explored, researched, and discussed. (Note: See Laura Gonzales’s letter on this group and ways that it served to mentor graduate students on translingual pedagogies and scholarship.)