

Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Practice
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Introduction

For me, undergraduate education in communication is about enabling informed and critical citizenship. In order for young people to become engaged in public life, they must have the skills to produce and unpack discourse in a range of media and contexts. For this reason, I take undergraduate teaching very seriously.

I believe that my undergraduate teaching succeeds in the goals I have set for myself: not popularity, but the provocation of critical thinking on the part of students; not just the provision of skills for students entering the job market, but the mounting of a challenge to the taken-for-granted in students' lives.

It is my view that popularity, as represented in the course instructor survey, should not be the only measure of effective teaching. I do not aspire necessarily to popularity, but primarily to education; deep thinking about phenomena and relationships previously taken for granted is sometimes painful. Our job is to challenge our generally excellent students to think and to give them the skills to approach complex and controversial matters with an informed and analytical mind, not simply to prepare them for a profession. Sometimes, the effort to achieve these ends is not received with universal comfort or acclaim. My view is that the teaching of critical content using a range of pedagogical methods can make a long-term impact on students' lives whether or not they enjoy the process at the time. Therefore, I regard students not as the consumers of a product, but as participants in proto-public space marked by engagement, controversy, and the accumulation of new information and skills.

All of my courses contain a strong cultural diversity component, emphasizing the production and consequences of discourses constituting the social roles of women, gays and lesbians, African-Americans, Hispanics, immigrants, and other underrepresented and oppressed groups.

All undergraduate classes are up on Blackboard (though they are not web-based), featuring syllabi, images and speeches for analysis, assignments, review sheets, and lecture outlines for students to download.

Undergraduate Classes

Theories of Persuasion: Unlike many persuasion courses, mine focuses on the critical reception of political and cultural messages on the collective level. Following Aristotle and Kenneth Burke, the course uniquely provides critical insight regarding how messages encourage us who to be, who to become, what to believe, and what to do, not only as individuals affected on the psychological level but also as members of a society that is cultivated in persuasive messages in non-obvious ways. This course involves extensive use of internet and visual media, including a new unit on persuasion and the image. I have initiated the use of periodic “minute papers” asking students to express their learning and their concerns in the course.

This course features an extended, applied unit on ethics. The worksheet and discussion of a set of unique ethics scenarios generates excellent discussion and thinking.

Speech Writing and Criticism: My most popular course, Speech Writing combines the production of speeches (informative, evaluative, policy, and ceremonial) with the skills of rhetorical criticism, applied to speeches selected by the students themselves. The rotation of production and criticism generates a great deal more insight as to the workings of speeches than either subject in a stand-alone course. I am enclosing my original materials that condense the subject of rhetorical criticism into six cogent lectures that have proven to be accessible and interesting to students.

This course, a significant writing component, requires four speeches from a perspective or on a topic selected by the student, and three rhetorical-critical essays on speeches from the same perspective or topic area. All writing undergoes an in-class workshop with peer, faculty, and teaching assistant feedback.

Gender and Communication: This course offers both a broad and well-supported description of gender differences in communicating and critique of the construction of gender and sexual roles in language, culture, media, and politics. Drawing from a range of critical essays and primary texts, students explore their fundamental assumptions about their gender and sexual identities in the context of the discourse that surrounds them.

Communication and Social Change: I believe that this is the only social movements course offered in the undergraduate catalog. In a time of social upheaval about war, economics, globalization, and so on, the course offers students key resources to understand the dynamics of agitation and control in U.S. society. From the analysis of a number of speeches and other social movement documents, students learn some necessary but under-taught history about the role of movements in making social change. The course surveys the dilemmas facing movements and the prospects for them today. One innovative aspect of the course is the requirement that students attend and report on social movement events and rhetoric, either as participant or observer. Inexplicably, students balked at this assignment (even given the option of observation rather than participation) and seemed uninterested in movements, taking the class as a requirement rather than as a subject of genuine interest. This course definitely should be among those

allowing cross-university early registration in order to include students for whom it is not just fulfillment of a requirement.

Communication, Controversy, and Citizenship (new for 2006): Our students have been told in high school and college that certain touchy subjects are “out of bounds” for class assignments and discussion. Their curriculum has become increasingly dedicated to practical skills applicable to the business setting rather than to political deliberation. Many have told me that they would like to explore what they and others think about controversial subjects. However, they fear offending classmates and professors and taking intellectual and political risks. Part of that fear has to do with under-confidence in one’s knowledge and skill at presenting ideas in a non-personal way. They also need to know how to find credible information from diverse points of view. Many get to their senior year without having had to write a single research paper. Many uncritically regard questionable web sites as credible research sources. They do not read daily newspapers and often do not know what an academic journal is. They do not know how to find information supporting or refuting their positions. This class provides training in these skills alongside discussions of what it means to be a citizen. The class will allow students to choose individual and group topics and to conduct research on those topics, each of which will become the focus of a class unit. They will be required to share information with classmates in the form of briefs prepared from their research. They will lead class discussions about the issues they have chosen. The preparation will culminate in a debate by two teams of students on that unit’s focus.

Graduate Classes

In graduate classes generally, I am quite seriously committed to the following goals:

- offer students a cognitive map of key concepts and debates in the subject area
- build the students’ basic library of books and articles in the subject area
(resulting inevitably in complaints about the reading load)
- stimulate thinking and discussion of readings and artifacts
- provide up-to-date readings and lectures, including contemporary challenging works of key importance in the field right now.

My classes are marked by ample preparation and constant updating of readings and lecture notes.

The cycle of classes I offer is key to many students’ work programs, representing a comprehensive array of critical theories and methods that come together in an overall project of critique and contemporary theory.

Rhetoric and Ideology: My signature course, this class offers a survey of Marxist and subsequent critical discourse theories with attention to their applicability to rhetorical texts in political and cultural contexts. This course is unique at the University and in the field; numbers of colleagues and students seek out my syllabus as interest in classical critical theory has increased dramatically over the last several years. One innovation featured in this course is a theory map that locates contemporary critical theories on a grid with two axes: economic vs. discursive, and agency vs. structure.

Feminist Theory and Rhetorical Criticism: This class derives the implicit rhetorical theories from feminist political theories generated from the suffrage movement to the present. In addition to a discussion of contemporary poststructuralist feminist theory and debates therein, the course uniquely surveys actual practical feminist theory as it has evolved over the last two centuries.

Rhetoric and Social Movements: This course is unique in its close attention to both theory of social movements and the primary documents of movement actors. The dual emphasis enables students to understand the rhetorical history of movements alongside their engagement with key theoretical debates in this area.

Rhetoric, the Public, and Community: This course taps into one of the cutting-edge concerns of rhetorical studies today, namely, the prospects for actual democratic practice among citizens in public in the age of the spectacle and political apathy. This area is the specialty of the department at Northwestern and soon will be among the central offerings of the University of Iowa's budding Public Advocacy emphasis.

Rhetoric and Popular Culture: This class could be phased out to avoid redundancy with Barry Brummett's class in cultural studies. However, it does offer a unique survey of critical cultural theory from the early Frankfurt School through rhetorical studies of cultural texts and contemporary theories of culture and society. It may remain a good source of an overarching map of this terrain, providing a guide or set of categories and questions for other specific information.

Conclusion

I believe that my courses, both graduate and undergraduate, are conceptually strong, well organized, and innovative in terms of content and delivery. They provide an essential component of critique and cultural diversity to our curriculum at both levels. The ways that they challenge and trouble students may not be weaknesses in my teaching, but strengths.