
Fredrik deBoer
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My first day of teaching any class in the language arts involves making a statement to my students that is undoubtedly true and yet which they frequently resist: that they are already language users, and that my job is not to make them into effective speakers, readers, and writers, but to help them to reveal the effective speakers, readers, and writers that are already within them. I further work to ensure that I always treat student desire as a priority, but never as my only priority, and to bring both the global and the local together in my teaching.

Helping Students Recognize Their Already-Existing Passion for Language

While it's the dream of any teacher to inspire students, in the day-to-day work of teaching broad groups of diverse students, we must rely on more mundane interactions. A great teacher may, at times, inspire students to become language users in a way that they never were before, but this process is necessarily alchemical; we cannot assume that we can replicate such inspiration at scale. Instead, rather than attempting to make students into language users, I work with them to discover the ways in which they are already skilled and dedicated users of language. Students come to us already immersed in language across a variety of media: they keep journals, read blog posts and novels, write on Tumblr and Twitter, record video messages on Snapchat and YouTube, listen to podcasts, and more. The problem is not that students don't compose or enjoy composing, but that they too often see these types of language use as unrelated to their academic work. I encourage them to recognize the connections between their personal and academic worlds, by integrating social media and online publishing into my classes and by showing them how rhetorical and stylistic techniques can be used across these different contexts.

Though the digital world has made video, audio, images, and multimodal composing available to many, text remains a widespread and privileged form of communication. In the realm of writing specifically, I again reject the notion that students are typically uninterested or resistant. In fact, many students are passionate writers before they ever step foot in our classes. What they lack is a clear sense that they can translate this passion into the academic realm. I find that an effective means to bridge this gap is through attention to actual prose—to the development of individual styles and voices in student writing, rather than work in genre or modes. As a specific example of how I try to address this gap, I frequently implement an assignment cycle that addresses style. Made up of three distinct assignments, this cycle iteratively develops student understanding of what prose style means, demonstrating to them that they are already stylists, and giving them tools to articulate what kind of style they want to use. In the first part, students undertake a stylistic analysis, writing a brief examination of how a given writer's style functions, in order to gain familiarity with the vocabulary of style. In the second part, students write a parody of another writer's style, exaggerating that style to better understand how it works. In the final part, students write a highly-stylized text of their own, using what they've learned to better express themselves. This new grasp on style can be applied to personal and academic writing alike, bringing these contexts together into closer contact and enriching student appreciation for language.

Student Desire & Student Need

A teacher who never entertains students, or gives them a break, will dull the love for learning and lose the ability to inspire. A teacher who does nothing but entertain will inevitably fail to provide students with

the skills they need, and worse, never demonstrate to them the importance of persistence and resilience. Negotiating these two extremes lies at the heart of the day-to-day work of my pedagogy.

The notion of the “student-centered” classroom is a commonplace in the teaching philosophy genre. What exactly it means to make a class student-centered, though, is a matter of debate. Used without care, the term might be taken to mean classes that are dedicated first to student enjoyment and entertainment. While I believe that good teaching can and should be engaging and fulfilling for students, I also believe that the service model of education, where students are treated as customers making an economic transaction rather than as students who need to be challenged and inspired, is a mistake for higher education. Instead, I think that instructors must negotiate a careful path, considering both what students want and what they might need for their later academic and professional lives.

A good, practical example of navigating this kind of tension involves the assignment of complex and challenging materials or assignments. If a course is too consistently challenging, it threatens to leave many students behind, becoming disillusioned and disengaged. But if students fail to learn key skills or abilities because acquiring them is difficult or monotonous, they will emerge from their classes ill-equipped to succeed in their academic and professional lives. For example, I know many introductory writing teachers who advocate abandoning the traditional research papers, as such assignments can often be difficult to implement effectively in an introductory course, given how the many moving parts can frustrate students. But since researched writing is often an essential part of other college courses, to fail to address these skills could leave students unprepared. I have found that a good compromise is to assign a research assignment such as an annotated bibliography, which allows them to practice the techniques of academic research while removing the difficulty of integrating that research into a long paper.

Local Contexts & Global Perspective

In the digital age, we are regularly informed that we live in a global community, where new technologies make near-instantaneous communication with vast numbers of people possible. Even with the growth of video, audio, and image-based communications online, written text still remains the primary means through which we reach out to those across the world, making our pedagogy more essential than ever. With the rise of online classes, it is easier than ever to imagine that we as teachers and students are members of a global community rather than a local one.

Yet something is lost when we lose sight of the local communities and contexts in which we are embedded. Within the tradition of place-based education, writers like Wendell Berry have advocated for paying attention to where our teaching actually happens, to recognizing that where our classrooms are geographically and socially impacts how students think and learn. This recognition of local contexts is especially important given that university students and employees sometimes have the bad habit of thinking of themselves as necessarily separate and disconnected from the local communities in which they reside.

Moving forward, our writing classrooms should be sites where we engage at both the global and local level. There is no contradiction between recognizing that we as writers are members of global discourse communities that are nevertheless embedded in local contexts. We can facilitate this kind of perspective by generating assignments that ask students to explore local spaces to show how they are parts of global communities, or which ask students to consider how local perspectives can enrich global thinking.