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Teaching Philosophy Statement

"We teach what we most want to learn."

Kate Bornstein (2014)

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors—teacher on the one hand and students on the other. Accordingly, the practice of problem-posing education entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction to be resolved. ... [80] The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [themselves] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

Paolo Freire (2005, pp. 79-80)

Following gender outlaw, queer elder, trailblazer, and educator Kate Bornstein's formula for learning/teaching, what I would most like to learn is how to be free and this, in turn, is what I would most like to teach. Teaching/learning freedom in this context is not a theory-based curriculum about the philosophy and history of freedom, or a subject matter limited to any single academic discipline. Rather, it is a paradigm of teaching/learning itself as a practice of freedom in any discipline—a process conjointly orchestrated by educator and student in order to transform ourselves and our world. My main areas of expertise, political philosophy and critical disability studies, provide many tools for implementing such a teaching/learning philosophy. My particular teaching goals within my general approach to **teaching as a praxis of freedom** are the following: *Radical Accessibility* (making the classroom radically accessible for all bodyminds and learners through the implementation of Universal Design principles); *Interdisciplinarity/Intersectionality* (commitment to academic interdisciplinarity and political intersectionality); *Diversification of the Curriculum* (the active diversification of both philosophy and disability studies curricula which reflects such commitment to intersectional and decolonial politics); *Collective Work Ethic* (fostering a collective work ethic where we all take responsibility to create/teach/learn); *Critical Thinking* (fostering critical thinking skills and the art of asking questions).

My strategy for creating a radically accessible classroom involves taking steps *before* finalizing the syllabus by doing preliminary work on making all classroom material including the classroom space as accessible as possible with as wide range of accommodations implemented as possible (from wheelchair access to scentless environment, to making sure all reading material is readable by text-to-speech software, etc.) The syllabus lists every accessibility feature and asks for student feedback through an anonymous online pre-course survey. I also make myself available through email and office hours in case students would like to give non-anonymous feedback. This strategy is preferable to merely adding a reluctant paragraph to the syllabus stating that the teacher will make accommodations on the condition that the student “out” themselves as disabled (and/or provide some kind of proof of their disability). The latter approach reflects an ableist paradigm that treats disability as a “special needs” category whereas the needs of the disabled students to flourish are basic needs. Making the classroom as accessible as possible makes all learners flourish. For instance, accessibility technology, such as closed captioning or text-to-speech, tends to help putatively non-disabled people thrive as well.

Politically, I am committed to intersectionality, which is a framework for understanding oppression that epistemologically and politically privileges the perspective of the oppressed—especially those oppressed in multiple ways. In a nutshell, oppressive systems such as capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, ableism, and so on, historically and materially intersect and co-constitute one another. It is thus impossible to struggle against only one of them without understanding and struggling against all of them. Similarly, the academic division and subdivision into disciplines reflect and reinforce political and historical structures of hierarchy as well as stifling knowledge production and true academic dialogue. An academic commitment to interdisciplinarity seeks communication, collaboration, and solidarity across disciplines. Incorporation of the principles of political intersectionality and academic interdisciplinarity requires the creation of an inclusive academic environment that is informed by subjugated knowledges previously shut out of academia. Both my main areas, philosophy and critical disability studies, are unfortunately heavily focused on knowledges produced in the West, while also remaining very white and very male-dominated. My strategy for implementing the principles of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality begin with diversifying my curriculum to be mostly, if not entirely, composed of cutting-edge work by scholars from diverse geographical, economical, racial, and gender backgrounds.

Reflecting the diversification of the curriculum, the classroom itself is organized on the principles of inclusivity where the contributions of all students, who are considered bearers of experience and knowledge, are valuable. Following from this, the class is conceived as a forum of collective work which we gradually build over the entire semester. The role of the teacher is the facilitation of this collective work environment. My strategy for fostering this collective work ethic includes hard work on all our parts. Each week there will be approximately 50 pages of material to be closely read and students will generate short weekly responses to one of the readings. The responses are not graded but receive comments and form the basis of our discussion where the participation of each will be collectively facilitated. In addition, each student presents/facilitates discussion on one of the

readings once a semester. Close engagement with texts in these various ways through close readings, responses, presentations and collective discussions take us collectively to a better understanding of the works under question and fulfill our goals for the course.

In addition to, and in connection with, diversifying our curriculum and creating an inclusive and collective learning environment, another important step in striving towards teaching as a practice of freedom is the fostering of critical thinking skills. Philosophy provides some of the best tools for the acquisition of such skills. As an analytically trained philosopher, one of my strategies for fostering critical thinking is to provide resources and exercises that demonstrate how arguments work; how to read with an eye to identifying arguments, premises, theses, and conclusions in a text, as well as how to construct good arguments without creating straw men or committing fallacies. In relation to these resources in argumentation, another skill set philosophy can provide is the art of asking good, fundamental questions which deepen our inquiries and move us away from superficial learning. Since such exercises and inquiries, similar to the Socratic methodology of asking questions, do not require any additional information, preparation or expertise, I find them to be democratizing tools that encourage participation from all. These close reading and argumentative skills lead to well-organized and clear writing, especially when coupled with my methodology of dividing final paper assignments into outline, draft, and final draft, written in several instalments with peer-reviews and instructor feedback for each step.

In conjunction with the five tenets of my teaching, I am a proponent of ungrading. Grading is detrimental to learning and teaching. As a disability scholar, I view most of the cognitive requirements of academic success as exclusionary and ableist, designed to reward educational, linguistic, economic, and racial privilege, and geared towards the success of certain forms of normalized cognitive processing, rather than actual understanding and learning. Ungrading practices, informed by a robust intersectional disability justice framework, can be a promising start in the direction of ensuring academic success for all bodies and minds. Since it is not possible to design a course with no grades at all in a structural environment where instructors are required by university regulations to submit a course grade, I design courses where 40 percent of the course grade comes from ungraded assignments and where all the course grade ultimately comes from a labor-based schema. Instead of ranking the students according to arbitrary and exclusionary standards, a labor-based system recognizes and awards the sincere labour student expends in coursework.

I hope that the impact of these five strategies, along with ungrading practices, will be transformational for all involved, teacher and student alike, as we think and move collectively about making our spaces radically accessible, diversifying our knowledge, collectivizing our learning, and honing our critical skills. This impact is best measured by student assessment of this process, at the beginning, halfway through, and at the end, which I facilitate with pre-course, mid-course and end-of-course anonymous surveys through Moodle.