

Jamie L. McDaniel—Teaching Philosophy

When people ask me what I do, I often distinguish between two parts of my job. Though rewarding, research and writing are the “work” parts of my job, while teaching is the “fun” part. By creating a classroom atmosphere that focuses on reading as a transformative experience facilitated by writing, I strive to pass on my passion for teaching and learning to my students. While I realize the difficulty in reaching all the students I teach, each missed opportunity to help a student experience the fun in learning spurs me on to create new and better ways of teaching.

For example, despite the specifications of an assignment, many students initially regard me as the primary audience of their essays—a common tendency in undergraduates. In response, I created an assignment in which I ask students to submit a nomination to the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. This assignment not only provides an opportunity to discuss evaluation in expository writing, but also furnishes a defined “real” audience outside the classroom. Students then mail the essays to the Library of Congress. Many of them, consequently, receive messages about their submissions and derive a firm sense of accomplishment from the experience. Before they post the essays, the students must revise their initial drafts. The fact that outside authorities will read these essays encourages students to think about global and local revisions in a thoughtful way, and future essays are often more polished as a result.

Exercises such as this one employ a version of problem-based learning (PBL), a crucial component of my teaching philosophy. This method provides students with a challenging way to approach the learning process, and it also challenges me as a teacher and prevents me from settling into a routine. PBL begins with students working in small groups, delving into and determining key issues to solving a “real-world” problem under the guidance of a facilitator. By focusing on a realistic problem, students develop a varied perspective and a deeper knowledge of the subject area. PBL shows students that concepts discussed in literature and composition courses are not devoid of the experiences of real life.

One such transformative experience occurs in my Theories and Technologies of Writing course, where we engage in role play for a group project that discusses some of the major theoretical approaches to writing studies. I tell the students that they have been chosen to serve on the English Committee for Interactive Theory Education (ExCITE). The project asks the students to describe the primary tenets of a particular school of rhetorical criticism or writing studies methodology, to demonstrate how the theory can be applied to texts in order to not only further understand the texts but also the theory itself, and to use some kind of interactive activity as a tool to communicate these points. This project is often the students’ first encounter with the theories, methods, and practices of writing studies. In developing creative ways to communicate difficult ideas to their audience, they arrive at a greater understanding of the rhetorical strategies that theorists use. One group wrote a soap opera in which each of the characters represented an idea offered by Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns in their approaches to the history of the book. After we acted out the roles, the students used the content and ideas performed in the presentation to shape our discussions for the rest of the semester. Another group had the class create memes and used Carolyn Miller’s conception of genre, in conjunction with Bradley Wiggins’s ideas about participatory culture, to establish memes as a genre in their own right.

While I know that my courses will not transform every student, I always strive to guide students to understand the relation of linguistic and visual representations to the world around them. Consequently, my Persuasive Gaming class provides its participants with a critical awareness of the complex and ever-evolving interaction between texts and images in participatory culture. Using Ian Bogost’s framework of procedural rhetoric, the students come to understand how the processes of gaming use simulated procedures to mount arguments about how real-world procedures work. The semester-long project for this course had students create their own persuasive game prototypes involving the difficulties of escaping poverty, the problems of our current prison system, and the ways that racism, sexism, classism, and ableism become embedded in culture. This assignment allows students to see how their work contributed to a larger academic conversation, as one group has continued to work on their game and plans to build a Kickstarter campaign to produce it.

One of the drawbacks of PBL has also helped me to develop one of my strengths as a teacher. Because PBL focuses on key issues of a specific problem, I understand that PBL does not always promote free-form discussions that often lead to “eureka” moments for the students. A former student once wrote that she appreciated how I go “along with the flow of the class conversation.” While I have teaching objectives, such as understanding the methods of characterization in a novel or considering the ways in which workplace discourse represents marginalized groups, I also appreciate the importance of the process of developing one’s own critical voice. This process often involves straying from the intended path, but those moments when we venture into unknown territory are the most valuable for the students and the most exciting for me as a teacher.