

# Statement on Teaching

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## **Goals**

What do I hope to achieve when I enter a tutorial of 25 or so students, or a lecture hall with over a 100 students, or a workshop with university faculty and teaching assistants, or my office, to sit side-by-side with a single student? The dynamics, content and strategies shift, but my goals are constant: to transmit a passion for learning, for self-awareness and self-reflection, for the energizing process of discovering, shifting perspectives and revisioning what is possible. I want to empower my students, trigger and nourish their curiosity, and encourage their questions and their confidence. I do believe I have knowledge and useful ideas to impart, so I prepare carefully, take material seriously, and expect my students to do the same. But what I truly want to give them is not answers, but questions. During the time we spend together, and apart, I hope my students learn more about how I think than what I think. I try to make visible for them the process of thinking and ways of knowing, to provide them with strategies for generating ideas, for critical reading and writing that will help them realize their potential and catch the joy of learning. And always, quite deliberately, I try to listen carefully and openly enough to learn from them.

## **Philosophy and Teaching Practices**

I cannot define teaching in any absolute or even general sense. I do not always know why it sometimes takes flight, and sometimes seems such a struggle. But I suspect it is this very complexity and challenge that motivates me.

My own philosophy of good teaching insists that there must be a dynamic of learning, an exchange of ideas, and a way for students to engage with the material in ways both meaningful to them and relevant to the framework of the course or the task at hand. I do not believe in authoritative or elitist models of teaching, though I have sometimes had authoritative teachers and have learned from them. Nor do I believe that "free-ranging" discussion in tutorials, of the kind too often filled with personal anecdote and unexamined opinion, is very productive, though it is easy to spark and sometimes instructive. Instead, I try to focus my students, to build with them a forum where they can take risks safely, a place where there is mutual respect and room for multiple voices and multiple views. I try to set boundaries of decorum, tolerance, and relevance, but within those boundaries, I try to be provocative. By this, I do not mean that I try to be a devil's advocate, or unnecessarily controversial, but I do encourage my students to question assumptions, resist absolutes, deconstruct and challenge power structures.

I appreciate that my own teaching experiences at York are unusually rich and varied. Within the Humanities Division, I am involved in team-teaching with at least one other, and often several, colleagues. Together, we design and amend our course, share the lectures, and craft the syllabus and assignments. Everyone attends everyone else's lectures, and we meet regularly to discuss our ideas, our teaching styles and strategies, and our students. For the last six or seven years, I have concentrated my teaching in the Humanities Division at the first year level in the Foundations Programme. The nine-credit courses in this programme teach interdisciplinary material with an emphasis on critical skills pedagogy. At the opposite extreme, in the Centre for Academic Writing, I teach academic writing in a one-to-one setting: just one student, one assignment (from courses across the Arts curriculum) and me. I teach students at every grade level and every level of proficiency, mature students, native speakers and ESL students. I have also taught outreach "bridging" courses in communities close to the York campus for the School of Women's Studies. These courses, which provide mature and refugee women access to higher education, emphasize feminist content and critical thinking, reading and writing.

I believe that this range of experience and the kinds of students I've had have definitely shaped my philosophy and teaching practices. The leitmotif here is marginality. Many of my students on a large, multicultural, urban campus are members of cultural minorities. The majority of my students have been women. My task is to make a space for them, to validate their experience, to demystify the process of learning for them so that their voices matter. The marginal perspective is often a radicalizing and transforming one. I believe that accessibility and transformation are at the heart of good teaching, the larger sum of its parts. When I'm at my best, I believe I can make a difference, one student at a time, one class at a time, one course at a time. And I am increasingly committed to this philosophy in a province where education itself, and the liberal arts in particular, is increasingly marginalized by government policy and funding.

## **Professional Development and Publications**

I began teaching at York as soon as I finished my Masters degree, and taught for 15 years as a member of the contract faculty. In 1990, I entered the full-time tenure stream. The Dean of Arts at the time gave me the choice of entering either the professorial or alternate stream. I chose the alternate stream, the teaching intensive stream, since that seemed to best fit my talents and interests. I have never regretted that decision. Tenure in the alternate stream requires publication and service to the university, but candidates must demonstrate excellence in teaching. I received my tenure in 1992, and have always viewed research and teaching as a joint venture. What is perhaps more unusual is that curriculum reform has been a strong interest and an important source of my own professional development. Here I will mention two projects: Steps to Arts and the Foundations Programme.

Steps to Arts is a programme designed for students who have suffered structural disadvantages, such as prejudice, disabilities, and family hardships, such that they have been unable to reach their academic potential, or may not have considered that a university education is within their reach. I worked with an implementation team during the design of Steps, and then inherited the programme when I was in the Dean's Office. Traditionally, these students do not have high school grades that would qualify them for university admission. Our task is to determine which of these students could succeed academically if given the opportunity and a network of academic support. Financial support is an especially essential issue for this group, and I helped set up a programme of student fellowships with the [Maytree Foundation](#) in Toronto which enabled students to earn \$15,000 a year by working 10 hours a week in a variety of community centres and schools. This freed them from service jobs which required many of them to work 30 hours a week or more in order to pay their tuition.

The Foundations Programme in the Faculty of Arts was a major curriculum reform of our general education programme that grew from a Task Force on the first-year experience of students. Our goal was to enrich the first year curriculum so that every entering student in the Faculty (approximately 4,000) would take an interdisciplinary course in either the Humanities or Social Sciences that would emphasize the teaching of critical thinking, reading and writing skills. The courses are intensive writing courses, rooted in particular content and subject areas. They are nine-credit courses which involve 4 hours of student contact per week. The programme also mounted Foundation courses at the second year level in an effort to cover a range of critical skills as well as allow for the development of skills.

The initial task was daunting: a very large number of courses in both the Humanities and Social Science Division needed to be redesigned. Faculty were sometimes very enthusiastic, sometimes skeptical, and sometimes very critical. However, the redesign of the curriculum led to vigorous discussions of critical skills pedagogy and a renewal of interest in teaching strategies and assignment design, as well as more effort to offer workshops on teaching to faculty and teaching assistants. Our goals were ambitious, but the programme has now been running for five years, and we are continuing to learn from the experience. Since leaving the Dean's office, I have been a Foundations resource person for the Humanities Division and continue to work with colleagues and teaching assistants on a variety of strategies for teaching critical skills.

My professional work has also included giving workshops at conferences, principally STLHE, and at other universities in Canada. In 1995, I was invited to give a series of two-day teaching workshops on a variety of topics for the National Faculty in the United States. I have worked with teachers in Alaska, Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, and have also worked jointly with three other scholars in designing and delivering a two-week, intensive summer programme for teachers from the Delta States. Traditionally underfunded, and often faced with serious cultural disadvantages, schools in these states struggle to meet national performance standards. We have had many liberating and gritty discussions about testing standards and measures, and together have crafted learning cycles relevant to the teachers' particular classroom challenges and their students' needs. My respect for these unheralded teachers, working in inadequate classrooms in very tough neighborhoods, is immense.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the contributions to my own professional development afforded by my colleagues and by The Centre for Support of Teaching at York. The Centre for Academic Writing has 3,000 students enrolled in its tutoring programme, and an ongoing series of professional development seminars on the teaching of writing. We have videotaped each other, and regularly sit in on each other's tutoring sessions. I have also met wonderful teachers from History, Psychology, Women's Studies, English, Kinesiology, Anthropology, and Social Science and I have brazenly stolen from them all that I can. There is a strong teaching culture at York, one that renews and refreshes me, and one that has mentored and encouraged me.

### **Classroom Teaching**

In the end, the interaction between me and my students, and among my students, is the core of my professional life. I genuinely enjoy my students; I concentrate on their potential rather than fixate on their weaknesses; and they give me as much energy from their enthusiasm as I give to them. Within the Humanities Division, I have taught in the first, second, and third year courses on fantasy techniques and purposes for almost two decades, and I find that this subject matter melds well with my teaching philosophy. The recurring motif of the journey is an apt metaphor for the journey afforded by education, and the emphasis on subversion, mirroring, and revisioning often matches my goals and strategies. I often model thinking exercises in the classroom, and encourage my students to apply them to the texts we study in order to develop multiple perspectives and question structures of authority and consensus realities. In the Bridging courses, designed for mature women, feminist content often validates their experience, and helps them redefine their goals within a supportive environment. One-to-one tutoring in the Centre for Academic Writing is a challenging and intensely rewarding teaching and learning dialogue. Our task is to diagnose writing problems for individual students and to teach them a range of strategies which will help them understand the complexities of the writing process, and eventually become independent and persuasive writers. Students are often extremely self-conscious about their writing. Earning their confidence and trust, and learning to listen to what they say, and sometimes do not say, is an important part of the process. This one-to-one focus has taught me most about the relevance of different learning styles--the same strategies do not work equally well for different students--and it has sensitized me to the role of supportive criticism and to different rates of learning. In turn, I have tried to apply what I have learned from teaching individual students to larger groups of students. I try to vary my strategies to appeal to a range of learners, and to help my students develop a sense of pride in their progress, rather than focus solely on results.

In all of my teaching experiences, I encourage interaction and risk-taking. I want my students to take ownership of their writing, and their learning. I want them to challenge themselves and test out their ideas. None of this works if I set myself up as the person with all the answers, or the right answers. None of this works unless I am open-minded myself, or unless I am willing to say "I don't know. How can we find out?" I try consciously to vary the kinds of assignments I use and to sequence assignments such that students have an opportunity to build on their skills. I designed my [Reading Strategy Sheets](#) to help students dialogue with a text and understand the kinds of questions expert readers might ask themselves during the process of reading. The sheets also stress the interrelation between context, text, and intertextuality, and the combination of both lateral and vertical thinking in the process of making meaning. My Film Strategy Sheets are adapted from the same model, but stress the language of film. This year, I had

students work on the Film Strategy Sheets as a collaborative project and the results were very positive. Students learned not only about film, but also about peer learning and evaluation.

In the Centre for Academic Writing, I sometimes have the pleasure of teaching the same students over several years, to see them develop from uncertain first year students to far more sophisticated fourth year students. Even when my courses are over and my classroom students move on, I am happy to continue advising them and tracking their progress. Two of my Bridging students, whom I met at the very beginning of their academic careers, are now beginning their graduate careers. Our first group of Steps students graduated four years ago, and several have gone on to become lawyers and teachers. I cannot think of many other professions where such validation occurs. Teaching remains for me dynamic, challenging, varied and demanding. It has helped me become a more self-reflective person, and a more active learner. My students and my colleagues, over many years, have made my own journey illuminating and fulfilling. I look forward to its continuing.