

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

E. Ashley Rea
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

My first day of teaching began in the community center of an apartment complex housing newly arrived refugees from Nepal, Bhutan, Rwanda, and Iraq. The class, an introduction to basic English, was designed to facilitate the adult learners' transition to life in Fort Worth, Texas. As I stood nervously clutching a cardboard clock to demonstrate sentence constructions for discussing time, I accidentally misread the hour and minute hands. The students looked on quizzically as one piped up, "You, teacher? Or student?" Our class dissolved in laughter, and grinning, I replied, "Student. Definitely student."

My subsequent years of teaching in three universities and six community literacy organizations have reinforced my belief that teaching is a process of continual learning, an iterative practice of design and revision towards a responsive pedagogy. Working with English language learners navigating labyrinthian legal systems and uneven economies of literacy has brought into sharp focus for me the complex imbrication of literacy, technology, and equity. Responding to these experiences, my pedagogy draws on feminist and antiracist practices as well as teaching with technology and transfer models. I design my courses with three aims in mind: (1) to affirm students' lived experiences and expertise; (2) to facilitate their development as rhetors composing within a variety of modes and technologies; and (3) to build opportunities for students to transfer their rhetorical knowledge to the work they do in their own disciplines and communities.

Whether in first-year composition courses, upper-level technical and research writing seminars, or graduate-level teaching practicums, my teaching is based in a respect for students' existing literacies and knowledge. This entails starting with the recognition that my presence as a cis, able-bodied, white woman at the front of the classroom is never neutral. Consequently, I work to decenter classroom authority by collaboratively constructing community standards and assessment practices with my students. In my writing classes, we dissect hierarchies of language variety, troubling assumptions of Standard English as "right." As a teacher, I hope to create space for what Aja Martinez identifies as counterstory, a methodology "that functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies." To that end, the first assignment in my research writing course asks students to reflect on a genre that is particularly meaningful to their lives. While some students use the assignment to analyze the genre's discourse community from a distance, others take the opportunity to consider how genre and identity intersect. For example, one student crafted a narrative on the role of theater in navigating her complex feelings of hybridity as a Cuban immigrant while another chose to narrativize her own journey to reclaim her Jamaican identity through her art.

When teaching graduate students and new instructional faculty, I work to make sure they feel that their previous pedagogical experiences are heard and valued as we enter into new conversations together. My class for writing teachers offers a valuable opportunity to learn and practice more inclusive and equitable pedagogies. In one session, we read Geneva Smitherman on language variety and Student's Right to Their Own Language and listened to guest speakers on translingual and multilingual pedagogies. The following week, we read from Asao Inoue and Mya Poe on writing assessment and social justice. My class is designed to foreground the diverse needs of our undergraduate writing students. In our unit on constructing syllabi and unit plans, we read about

universal design and learned about best practices for accessibility from disability studies researchers. I believe inclusive pedagogy and universal design best facilitate meaningful learning experiences for all students.

My teaching encourages students to develop their rhetorical skills and theories of writing through a technology-embedded teaching for transfer approach. This approach encourages students to apply knowledge from their writing courses to other contexts through a curriculum involving a set of key terms, an embedded reflective framework, and a final “theory of writing” assignment. Teaching for transfer emphasizes the importance of reflection and metacognition. I have found that it works particularly well with approaches that ask students to compose with technology for specific audiences. All of my courses ask students to work in a range of media, from creating podcasts and videos to designing webtexts and coding eportfolios. Grappling with a new composing technology makes visible implicit divisions between form and content, troubling the assumed neutrality of design standards. Composing with digital technologies highlights the importance of accessibility, universal design, and usability. For example, my technical writing class asks students to consider standards for document design and organization, practices that they continue in their digital portfolios. For multimodal assignments, I ask students to also submit reflective memos detailing their process, so that I can assess students’ awareness of rhetorical choices rather than dexterity with a particular tool.

My teaching creates opportunities for transfer by centering the importance of writing for real world audiences. In my research writing course, students use technology to remediate their research to audiences beyond academic interlocutors. My students have penned investigative journalistic pieces on mass incarceration and living conditions in the Tallahassee federal correctional institution that they circulated through social media; created print and digital resources to support other first-generation college students; and produced a documentary on student perceptions of intersectional feminism. Writing to an audience beyond the classroom offers opportunities for students to consider the effects of their writing in their communities. Currently, my Digital Publics and Rhetorical Theory students are partnering with the Prescott Valley Library Adult Literacy Group to put into practice our conversations about literacy, technology, and equity. Students hone their grant-writing and web design skills to support the organization’s community literacy mission. This emphasis on audience and transfer continues in my technical writing and user experience writing courses. In these classes, students develop research plans, user personas and empathy maps, and conduct usability studies. Such activities highlighted the recursive cycle of drafting, testing, and revising; consequently, students brought heightened awareness of audience to their discipline-specific writing. Because the course is comprised of graduating seniors, I often conclude the class with a unit on professional portfolios for audiences of future employers—it is especially gratifying to hear from students who used these materials to start new careers.

The years following my first day of community literacy teaching have bolstered my understanding of teaching as a practice of continual learning. In my teaching inside and outside the university, I learn with and from my students. My hope is for students to leave my class with the understanding that writing is a practice of ongoing revision, one requiring the constant retooling of literate practices to meet the needs of exigence. By affirming students’ existing literacies and knowledge and facilitating transfer and rhetorical responsiveness across contexts, my pedagogy helps students thrive as writers both in the academy and in their own communities.