Statement of Teaching Philosophy

While every course should focus on a narrow topic or genre, the goal of any English instructor should be to reinforce the value of literary studies more broadly. As Elaine Showalter suggests in *Teaching Literature*, the aim is to train students to “do” literature, not to simply cover a specific historical era or genre: “Our objective in teaching . . . is to train our students to think, read, analyze, and write” (25). Most literature instructors like myself use student-centered teaching strategies, but beyond that I’ve developed three key areas to emphasize what Showalter and others see as essential to any literature classroom: critical reading and writing in digital and creative spaces, ethics and empathy, and remediation.

In addition to traditional reading and writing opportunities, I ask my students to practice such skills by working in digital and creative environments. In previous courses, I’ve asked students to keep an online journal to emphasize the value of reflection in analysis, as well as collaborative online blogs (using WordPress) to build a sense of community. In introductory courses like Composing through Narratives, I also require students to write creative nonfiction after reading nonfiction by Elie Wiesel, Amy Tan, and Virginia Woolf, illustrating the importance of such a genre in shaping identity and memory. Using digital spaces and creative projects not only makes reading and writing more enjoyable, but it also demands more attention to rhetorical situation and nonacademic genres.

I also focus on the ethics of representation and empathy, which are also key areas of my research. For example, in Great American Books I’ve asked students to write comparison papers about how the Black body is seen and represented in the work of authors like Hurston, Morrison, and Langston Hughes. We explore critical disability studies in relation to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, including the history of the grotesque and disability in the American national imaginary. And, in a course on cultural film studies, my students and I discuss the work of Walter Benjamin and Hayden White as it relates to historiography, including the various ways of representing the past and future. We even discuss movie posters and fan art as a way of stressing to my students that the ethics of representation doesn’t have to be relegated to dry, academic conversations. Key to any discussion of ethics is an emphasis on the ways art and literature can allow us to empathize with other individuals without necessarily othering or stereotyping marginalized groups.
Finally, my teaching involves a form of multidisciplinary remediation. I was first drawn to English as a student because of the malleability of the field, the way it easily connects with other disciplines. I encourage students to use their background knowledge to develop topics that interest them for major assignments, and I sometimes ask students to share research with the class to promote inquiry in the classroom. In past courses, I have included units on Holocaust literature that require students to perform archival research, as well as at least one visual or multimodal project that draws on theories and practices from media studies and visual studies. For example, I often spend at least some class time teaching students about information visualization practices, exploring graphs, maps, charts, and trees. I include bizarre or less common visualizations to show creative applications of visual information production (borrowing from designers like David McCandless and Manuel Lima), but my overarching goal is to explain to students that all knowledge is constructed—even the information in graphs and charts in academic articles. As such, another common assignment of mine is a remediation project that necessarily follows a research paper, which requires students to adapt their specialized research for a general audience using digital tools (like Piktochart for infographics or MakeSigns for visual posters), or, for a recent film studies course, a digital film magazine to make film studies research more accessible to the general public.

I never teach the same course the same way twice; however, I do emphasize critical reading and writing, ethics and empathy, and remediation every time. Instructors in English need to find new and creative ways to show students that literature is a valuable area of study, but it’s also important to remain true to what Showalter refers to as “doing” literature—to critical thought, reading, writing, and analyzing. If a student leaves my class thinking she has not only learned but also contributed to a pool of knowledge, I know I’ve been an effective instructor.

Work Cited