Teaching Statement

My pedagogy is very much grounded on my early training during my undergraduate years at UCLA, where I served as a Peer Learning Facilitator for the Covel Peer Learning Labs. Unique to this program was a unique emphasis on peer learning. We, as facilitators, worked to enable a collaborative learning environment otherwise unavailable to many undergraduates often faced with large lecture courses. Facilitating moves away from the top-down method of lecture-based teaching that frames student as passive consumers of knowledge toward a co-productive learning (between instructor and student, among students) that takes seriously how, not just what, students are learning. My peer learning sessions often eschewed conventional assessment in literary studies (i.e. short essays and final papers) in favor of alternative writing assignments such as class debates, weekly discussion posts, and annotated bibliographies to enable students to develop their thinking and writing in less high-stakes forms. Our training challenged us to think consistently about accessibility, which took many different forms from digital methods to flipped classrooms, and encouraged multimodal learning for students with very different learning needs.

My classes typically begin with reminders that the classroom is a collaborative space: we often free-write for 5-10 minutes, which allows students to recall questions and key points from the reading. As we share our free-writing with the group, students are already beginning to forward arguments. This sometimes shifts into smaller group discussions, but I prefer the inclusivity of larger group Socratic discussions, where students are prompted to engage one another’s thinking. Facilitator training taught me an important pedagogical minimalism: witnessing and facilitating student learning often involves a relinquishment of control and counterintuitive stepping back to allow students to take ownership of the learning process. The openness of my discussion-style classroom allows me to serve both as a participant or respondent to my students but more importantly as a witness and documentarian of their ideas. I use the board as a repository for my students’ key claims and turns of phrases, which by the end of the class, have entirely filled the board space. The students have visual confirmation of their own work in class and takeaways for their own notes. This accretive method works particularly well for retaining material over the semester as students find themselves referring to one another’s contributions. I apply this to writing workshops in which students collectively discuss their writing with peers and with me. Academic writing becomes a means of entering into a scholarly discussion that is already familiar to them in the classroom.

At the University of Pennsylvania, I have designed and taught three seminar-style courses in addition to co-teaching and directing several sections in faculty-taught lecture courses. As a scholar who incorporates methodologies from the history of medicine, disability studies, and literary studies, I strive to model interdisciplinarity in my teaching. In 2016, I taught one of the inaugural Junior Research Seminars, a research methods course for advanced undergraduate English majors. My course, Tales of Contagion from Plague to Public Health, followed the mutations of
plague discourse and representation from medieval iconography to contemporary film. This course evolved into my current seminar, *Contagion*, which investigates the enduring genre of what Priscilla Wald has called the “outbreak narrative” that imagines the dangers and implications of human contact. In both of these courses, poetry, prose, film, and art are all brought into dialogue. For example, in our discussion of Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, we examined shifting maps of London prior to the Great Visitation and the fire of 1665 alongside the long artistic tradition of *memento mori*. My *Disability Narratives* course similarly takes a multi-genre approach to a survey of works both written by and about disabled people.

My unique responsibility as an interdisciplinary scholar is not only to serve as a spokesperson for the value of the humanities to the sciences but also to resist this divide. I frequently assign scientific and medical texts alongside literary works to inspire students to consider the historical interrelationship rather than radical difference between literature and science. I task my students, whether they are pre-med or philosophy majors, to close-read writings across the disciplinary divide precisely because many of these texts, particularly those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were often not understood legibly as either “science” or “literature.” By examining the shared conventions and assumptions between a medical treatise and a novel, for instance, students find themselves reflecting upon their own ways of reading in relation to historical debates about evidence, belief, and knowledge. I often assign written “laboratory notebooks,” which adapts this fundamental scientific practice for students in literature to keep detailed records of their observations during active reading and to learn the incremental process of writing. This twist on the familiar commonplace book cements the connection between literary and scientific research as both acts of evidence- and data-gathering that help to develop and then answer nuanced research questions. Furthermore, this cumulative project provides foundations for more formal writing assignments by resisting the student impulse to write to the last minute and encouraging more long-term development of thinking and argumentation. Students come to major assignments much more prepared to write having “test-driven” their ideas and potential arguments in their notebooks, which I then encourage my students to share with one another.

Beyond Penn, I taught a shorter 10-week writing course at the Community College of Philadelphia. Most of my students, as I discovered on our first class meeting, were enrolled in pre-health or pre-science tracks that implicitly (and sometimes, explicitly) framed prerequisite writing courses as extraneous hurdles toward their degrees. To revise these assumptions and to appeal to the interests of my students, I structured my syllabus around the concept of medical debates and controversies. Incorporating my own investments in the medical and health humanities, I wanted my students to sit with the potentially uncomfortable tensions among the often clashing views of medical practitioners, bioethicists, philosophers, historians, activists, fiction writers, and patients. From the racial dynamics of Ebola coverage to the gendered reproductive implications of Zika treatment, each class session highlighted how the social, in each case, cannot be dissociated from the medical or the scientific. Despite vast differences in discipline, style, and positionality in each set of readings, my students embraced the challenge to think intersectionally about illness and
disability. Together, we practiced a kind of narrative medicine and ethics that I hope many of those students take with them into the clinic or into their respective fields.

I ultimately leave my classes wondering whether if I have made an impact on the way these students think about science and medicine’s relationship to society and culture. Yet, as Anne Hudson Jones reminds us, “these are changes that cannot be measured by statisticians looking at health outcomes zip code by zip code. They occur in individual lives one person at a time, on no predictable schedule or protocol, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically.”

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