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## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Questions that guide my teaching and course creation:
- What does it mean to be Human?
- What is the change you want to see in the world?
- What will you do to "be" that change?
- What are you willing to live for?
- What are willing to die for?
- How do you define community?
- To what communities do you belong?
- How do you create community in your life?

It is important to me that students "feel" and "know" people and events of the past and present, to enter history not with the idea that it is a series of irrelevant repetitions but enter it instead as a living process, filled with members of their families and communities – themselves even - to which and to whom they are connected. It is also important to me that my learning community is safe, challenging, transformative, student-centered, text and media rich, and organically responsive to the daily learning of my students. I believe each student *can and does* learn. It is the teacher's life purpose to discover the key that unlocks an amazing mind and heart and train both to breathe and live fully without fear.

To facilitate this type of collaborative embodied knowledge and learning, I create a learning community based on the needs, interests, and abilities of my students and my course objectives. Each assignment and activity is an opportunity for us to delve critically and with awe into our selves and new worlds. It is necessary to provide students with flexible structures and clear guidelines for reading and writing at the beginning of the semester to ensure that each student starts on similar ground despite his or her previous education.

It is also necessary to provide students with constructive feedback throughout the semester to allow us to map their growth. It is my practice for the first two papers to meet with students and offer them detailed suggestions for revision of content and ideas, and to redirect their thinking through specific references to the class texts and supporting materials. In this way, students learn how to critically engage a text word for word, idea by idea, and to situate themselves in it. For final group projects, I provide step-by-step project management. In this way, students learn how to work as a team and how to plan and structure a larger paper or presentation.

For many of my students, it may be the first time they encounter a Black Studies text or a text in which Black people have created research and narratives in which they are the center. While there are many joyful and artful subjects and histories in our field, there are just as many sad and horrible. It is my responsibility to help students enter those spaces and to ensure that they exit them whole – even though they will be forever changed and transformed. It is always my intent to be transparent about my own experiences when discussing subjects such as slavery because I believe it allows students to understand that history is *peopled* and can, therefore, be emotional and subjective.

For example, in my *Introduction to African American Literature* course, we viewed *Sankofa*. I was emotionally overwhelmed, said so, and cried. Remarkably, one of my students wrote to

make sure I was okay and to share that this movie also made him sad. It was this moment, however, that allowed us to really begin the conversation about what it means to be human, what we are willing to live for, and what we are willing to die for – and how oppressed people worldwide have answered and continue to answer these questions. In response to this question, one student responded by saying (paraphrase): I am sure I would be surprised by what I would live for and disappointed by what I would die for.

I believe deeply that students should have opportunities to demonstrate their understandings of the course materials creatively. Semester assessments may consist of quizzes that either the students or I create; short essays or personal response papers; or in-class presentations. Final projects, however, are creative. Because *Introduction to African American Literature* focused on science fiction, I randomly assigned students to groups at the beginning of the semester. The group's task: to create a brand new community as the final project. The community had to expand on the themes explored in our texts, and it had to include diverse human beings, cultures, and technology. In the *Black Women in the Diaspora* course, I asked students to create a project to honor a woman in their lives based on what they had learned in the course. As a practicing artist who enjoys collaboration, the latter project allowed me to include students in *Be/Coming: An American Masquerade,* the first work in the *Ancestral Masquerades* series that LaShawnda Crowe Storm and I created for Poetic Dialogue. The series is a community-based project that draws participants nationwide.

In both classes I witnessed unassuming students become group leaders and others display deep levels of compassion instead of competition. For example, in the literature class, when a group of students experienced major difficulties during their presentation, students turned to me to ask, "Can we help them"? Since I had structured the class as a community in which students took responsibility for themselves and each other, of course I said yes. What I could not have planned: students asked questions that empowered those group members to highlight the strengths of their project. In a different session of the class, students voted to give a group permission to "get it together" and return the next day to present. In the *Black Women in the Diaspora* course, it was not uncommon for students to directly ask each other about their racial and gender experiences on campus and how they confirmed, for example, Darlene Clark Hine's theory of cultural dissemblance or Deborah King's theory of multiple jeopardy. This allowed a Black male math student to speak of his struggles in comparison to the struggles both Black and White women faced in the STEM fields.

Finally, our 21st Century students expect and need 21st Century teaching methods and strategies. I make a point to learn about and use the available media and to incorporate student recommendations so that a diverse set of learning styles are addressed and introduced. This includes online forums/blogs, in-class research, student-led classes, music videos, movie clips and SKYPE conferences with guests. Once I used Poll Everywhere to get immediate and anonymous feedback on a classroom text. Teaching this way allows each student to participate. A student who is a visual learner excels in conversation and writing when he or she can "see". Similarly, a student who is a text-based learner excels in deconstructing a text, writing about it, and "breaking it down" for others to understand. Using these strategies, I move very subtlety from teacher to facilitator, and by the end of the semester my learning community has become a self-teaching, self-monitoring empowered knowledge force.