

Jillian Sayre
Teaching statement

Early in my teaching career I received a negative evaluation. Following what I suspect to be a pattern among new instructors, I focused a lot of energy on this one student's complaint. But instead of being defeated by the evaluation, I transformed her comments into an important motivation for my teaching practice. This student wrote: "It's not the instructor, it's the subject: English. There is no secret meaning behind books. They are just entertainment. . . books are just like movies, they just take longer to 'watch.'" I carried this comment with me as I developed my courses, courses designed to expose exactly what I failed to do for this student: to show the potential in and of language, its constructive or playful possibilities. My central goal in all my courses is to get my students to understand that words *do* something, that language produces texts that have meaning(s) and that these texts can in turn be grasped by looking at how authors use language to produce them. I want my students to understand that even if a text is entertaining it is still *doing* something, and learning to identify and understand what that is, a posture of critical reception, is an important part of participating in their worlds, realizing their potential as students, even citizens.

In one of my courses, a Critical Reading and Persuasive Writing course that I called "The Idea of the University," I worked toward these goals by asking the students to focus on a very immediate public sphere, the university (and specifically the University of Texas) and the kind of texts that circulate *about* and *in* this space. Together, we looked at how different authors constructed an idea of the university, its purpose and its students, and how these definitions contributed to certain persuasive ends. Students followed their local student paper, discussing the focus, form, and style of the paper and investigating how the individual articles, cartoons, and even ads may work together to produce a larger, corporate text. Students then practiced this collaborative writing as editorial groups, creating newspapers that addressed their own view of the university and its concerns. I designed the course as a way for students to see that the texts that surround them are interactive productions, and several students remarked that the course did in fact change the way they see this particular environment. One student even joined the staff of the student newspaper the following semester.

In another course, "Rhetoric of the Body," I asked students to study an even more intimate public: the body. Students thought about ways in which definitions are written on to the body, the possibilities of the individual to rewrite those definitions, and the extension of corporeal limits in the age of expansive, if not invasive technology. The comparative approach that I bring to my research also influences my work in the classroom. From British and American travel writing, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century encounters with the Other body, to the sociology of body modification to the imaginative and possibly non corporeal frontiers of science fiction, students confronted both bodies in the texts and the body of the text itself. One way that we did this was a multimedia assignment that required students to compose short documentaries that examined the role of body modification in community formation. Our text for the unit introduced this idea and the students were to complete their own research (interviews, or "ethnographies" as we called them) in order to investigate its claims. I was delighted to find a variety of conclusions among the groups, and the in-class viewings demonstrated to the students how arguments vary based on the evidence collected, that conclusions are often dependent on whom you speak to (the 'texts' at your disposal) and what questions you ask (how the author's interests or approach might influence the results). I also asked the students to use the project as a

way to think critically about composition; the students were to think about the topic at hand (body modification) but also writing itself, the ways in which arguments are communicated. We accomplished this by reviewing the discussion of film as composition from the 1971-2 issues of *College Composition and Communication*. Students were encouraged to think about how the articles depict the projects of writing and the university in general and to question how these definitions may have changed due to the proliferation and interactive qualities of media in the twenty-first century. Students wrote short reflection papers that asked them to insert their experience into the discussion from *CCC*. Several students used the experience of creating films to think critically about their own writing and the role of writing instruction at the university. Many appreciated the creativity encouraged by the project, while others were interested in the ability to perform original research. I was most impressed by those students that were inspired to incorporate filmic strategies into their writing process. One student, who previously dismissed outlining or pre-writing as unnecessary (because he perceived writing as an organic ‘event’), constructed a ‘story-board’ for the reflection paper and noted the facility of thinking about argument and structure before putting pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard. The Department of Rhetoric and Writing selected this project as one of the John Slatin Memorial MEME Award winners, an award that recognizes mastery of electronic media in the classroom.

Currently I am teaching writing intensive courses in literature at Wayne State University in Detroit. My “Frontier in American Literature” and “Women Writers in Early American Literature” are not simply period surveys but through them I also continue to work on developing my students’ understanding of how language works to create an environment that acts upon the bodies both in these novels, essays and autobiographical narratives but also upon the bodies of their readers. In studying the frontier, we also confront the freedom and terror encouraged by an environment in which traditional definitions are being renegotiated. In looking at early women writers in the Americas students can see how the written word, the page-in-public becomes a stage upon which an author can lay claim to national life. In order to emphasize the importance of language and hone the students’ skills in literary analysis, I encourage my students to focus solely on the text at hand for the first half of the semester, allowing secondary citations or comparative analyses only in the last assignment. Too often students neglect to consider the importance of a text by itself, considering it only as evidence for a larger topical argument or research question. By limiting the material available to the students for their longer assignments, I work to develop their ability to confront a text on its own terms

I work towards my pedagogical goals by balancing a challenging classroom environment with creative assignments and a good student-teacher relationship. In the classroom I use a mixture of lecture and discussion, interspersed with workshops or practicum, that encourage a directed participation and real-time use of the skills I am teaching, such as close reading and analysis. I grade as a reader, offering thorough and detailed comments about both the structure and details of their arguments, trying always to give the same time and effort to all students. I do this because I want them to see writing and reading as an interactive process, and because of this I usually require portfolio submissions in which they demonstrate their ability to use my feedback to revise their papers. My hope is that a student will leave my class with a better understanding of how texts work, their creative and transformative possibilities, or will perhaps discover new interests or even how a topic as seemingly tedious as English can play an important role in developing the interests she already has.