AN HONEST TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

An essay based on the idea of what a first-year composition instructor would really say in a teaching philosophy statement if given the chance to be frank. It is a look into the politics and personal struggles one instructor has with his job, but it is also a love letter of ethos to his former students as he tries to account for what might not always have been the best performance.

I taught my first introductory college composition course when I was twenty-two. I had no qualifications to teach the course. I know my students came into that class expecting their teacher to be someone who was well-versed in the subject; I know this because I expected the same out of all of my instructors in college — given how much money I was investing. Would it be fair for those students to demand their money back if they knew I were only a year or two older than some of them? How about if they knew the politics that the only reason I taught composition was that the creative writing program that brought me to that university for my master’s offered me a teaching fellowship so that I would not attend another school’s program? Yes, I started my composition career unqualified and only doing it for the money.

But my current students cannot demand such a refund. I have been teaching composition in various forms going on five years now. I have a few pedagogy classes under my belt. Despite not holding an advanced degree (or even a bachelor’s degree) in rhetoric or composition or even pure English, my three degrees (B.A. through Ph.D.) in creative writing areas compel my students to recognize I know a thing or two about putting words onto a page. Though none of this speaks to the essential question of if I am a good instructor, it does not matter. By teaching composition long enough, regardless of how well or poorly you do on the job, you satisfy the only question understaffed and underfunded departments ask: can we throw you into a classroom?

Instead of asking about my qualifications, my students ask me strange questions. How old am I? What is my real name? What is my pen name? Did I once work for the C.I.A. (I have a very private history)? Can they see my hair (I always wear a head covering of some kind; no, I am not bald or balding)? I do not answer these questions, and it only determines them to try harder to ascertain the answers. One of my current classes is stubbornly curious about my past and current identity so much so that they will interrupt the lesson to tease bits of my past out of me. I put them on the spot once and asked why they were so interested in knowing who I am. One student shot back: because you’re weird.

My students in Georgia know I have recently moved back to America after living in Israel. They know I have also lived in Texas, Montana, California, and New Zealand. They know I have worked as a food critic, pastry chef, cyclist, candy taster, university policy counselor, editor, masseuse, and dancer/choreographer. They know I lived in Beverly Hills — yes, that Beverly Hills — and I have the numbers of “famous” people on my phone. They know I was raised an Orthodox Jew. They know I do not drink soda and am vegetarian. They know I am a former body builder and can currently leg press half a ton — literally. I promise this information is revealed offhand in reference to other points, say how commanding the intricacies of grammar to your favor can take years just as pressing a thousand pounds involves a decade of five-pound weight plates gradually being added, but it is always the trivia that stays in their minds rather than my lessons about how to use a semicolon correctly. Maybe I am or maybe I am not weird — probably the former — but the average instructor I am not.

There is a look you receive after someone has seen you naked without you giving him/her permission to do so. I have walked into classes and been given that look by all my students in the room. It means one...
of them has stumbled upon my writings and found the picture of me dancing in my underwear with dollars sticking out of the elastic waistband. Perhaps they have read the essay the picture is attached to that explains that was a time in my life when I was faced with a debilitating brain disease. Without medical insurance, I paid full-price for treatment. This was at the beginning of the recession. Despite graduating valedictorian from an esteemed university, I could land no job. I swallowed my pride and made money by dancing on bar counters across the U.S. My average takeaway was several thousand dollars in cash for a weekend in New Orleans. I never did more than dance. I have never even tried a cigarette. Though I gave up this career a long time ago, there are times when I spend entire weekends evaluating essays that I half-jokingly remember I could be making triple my salary by getting my groove on to Robyn. Students usually stop asking me personal questions once they realize I do not tell them things about my past for a reason.

I was recently picked by my fellow composition instructors – we are all on doctoral fellowships, i.e., we are not choosing to be composition instructors – as the person most likely to want to teach composition. In certain ways, I think they meant it as back-handed superlative. This is not to say they dislike teaching composition but that there is something abnormal in my enthusiasm for teaching the course because it is not my primary field. I read pedagogical articles for fun and incorporate what I learn into my lesson plans. I design the entirety of my course months before the first day I step into the classroom. I memorize all my students’ names before the first day of class. At age twenty-two I applied to be on a panel at the College Composition & Communication Conference with a presentation on how deconstructing Lady Gaga music videos can be used to teach a rethinking of the page (unsuccessfully). I try hard.

I know a lot of my peers, peers who are good friends, cut corners. One of them only has office hours by appointment instead of the mandatory three hours at a fixed, weekly time. Others only read as much of a student’s paper as they can in a twenty-minute timeframe. This is what we in the business call the egg timer method. The former graduate coordinator for the department (not composition, but the umbrella of English) told all the new fellowship students during our teaching orientation that our research and writing comes first, and teaching comes last. But this is not a look-how-much-better-I-am story.

The reason I was a very successful go-go dancer was not because I was the best-looking guy. In fact, I looked little like the chiseled muscle gods who shared my shifts. But the patrons, most the just-off work crowd in Austin, Texas, loved me. They were in their forties and fifties. Still single. They lived lives with the belief that being able to laugh at whatever happens is the only way to survive. Muscle gods do not flinch for less than a five and will not talk to you for less than twenty. I was known for getting off the catwalk to talk to these men about their days, how their mothers were doing, and my plans to earn my Ph.D. and teach.

Perhaps if the university did not pay us a salary that is literally only a hundred dollars too much to qualify for food stamps – a coincidence? I think not – we would all care more as instructors. Perhaps if we did not have moonlighting clauses in our contracts that stipulate we cannot work other jobs while teaching, then we would not be as insulted with the university for genuinely believing it is possible to live off the meager salary we earn. Perhaps if the system did not exist where all I have to look forward to in the near future is an adjunct 4/4 position with little to no benefits and a similarly dismal salary, then I could write all of this off as a short-term obstacle. But class sizes will increase. More will be demanded out of first-year composition programs while wages and benefits freeze. I do not even think about tenure anymore. Perhaps this is the reason the graduate coordinator, who is a smart and kind man, told us to rank teaching as our lowest priority; we would be fools to give one-hundred percent to a system not interested in returning the favor.

But my students do not know these things. And what would be the point if they did? Are they going to rally together and refuse to pay tuition until graduate students and adjuncts are given livable wages and manageable working conditions? All they know is that they are paying to receive a good education; it is not their fault that the system is designed to short-change them.
So, I do work harder than some of my egg timer colleagues. I spend roughly thirty minutes to an hour per paper. I read every line and comment throughout. I hold office hours weekly during my scheduled times, which I announce at the start of every class and by appointment to accommodate students who cannot meet during the normal window, which means coming to campus on my days off.

This is not to say I am without fault. As an instructor, I have a bad time giving positive feedback. Commonly, students will read over their edited drafts to find I have marked up every possible error but leaving only one or two positive things to say. I promise this is not intentional. Years of being an editor have made me attuned to spotting areas for correction in an impersonal manner because my philosophy has always been that pointing out areas for improvement is a greater help than pointing out what is already working. This all stems from my dancing days when I trained under an ex-Soviet ballet master. He would walk around class with a cane… and then hit you with it wherever you needed correction. There were no thumbs ups, no smiles, no words of encouragement when you did the right thing: only the sound of the cane’s slice when your hips were not tucked in. Being on the receiving end of three to five “taps” per class would make most people cringe, but other dancers were jealous over the corrections I earned. Girls whom he never corrected cried over it. For me, when someone points out what you do wrong, it is a sign that the person believes in your abilities and is trying to make you stronger. I realize I am in the minority for thinking this.

I can also do a better job at commenting on student homework. I read the assignments but rarely say anything in response out of a lack of time. I used to be really bad with students who played with their cellular phones or surfed the internet on their laptops during class – rudely calling them out in front of their peers as if they were interrupting a concerto at Carnegie Hall. On that front, I have grown to accept it will happen, that it is not a personal act, and all that I need to do is make a note for myself to lower that student’s participation grade for the day. Oh yeah, I have a habit of assigning texts I have not read yet (on the recommendation from colleagues that said texts would be a great fit for my syllabus).

I remember the first set of instructor evaluations I received. They were mediocre scores; I was livid. For that class I had invested tremendous effort into grading every assignment (comments on the homework, too) and constructing my lesson plans to the minute. I felt they did not realize what I had done for them, and that if they had only seen what other instructors did (or rather, not do) they would appreciate my value. It has taken years for me to see that, yes, I devoted a great deal of time to that first class of mine, but that does not mean I was a good teacher. Does being an instructor who is more aware of his flaws make me a better instructor now? I still make a lot of mistakes, but I am happy to say I am at least seeing them and interested in fixing them.

Two things stick out from that batch of evaluations. The first is that the students ranked my class as the hardest on a difficulty scale of 1-9. I did not believe it at first, but this is true. No matter the course, my classes are hard. I assign a lot of reading. I assign a lot of writing. I demand a significant amount out of my students because I expect things out of them that they might not see in themselves yet. There is no compromise. I do not tolerate late work. My work load is not unbearable, but it is constant. I have had several students at the end of the semester thank me for all I did – the many journals, the quickened pace of the course compared to other classes (I prefer to give students more time to work on their portfolios, so I move through their major assignments more quickly than other classes do), and the straightforward critiques. I hope the ones who do not thank me are at least aware of why I do what I do.

The reason I hope they are aware is that the second thing the evaluations hit me with was that students felt I did not appreciate them enough. This one hurt. I mean hurt like watching someone punch your mother hurts. Perhaps it was and is because I do not give enough positive feedback in student work that they feel I do not appreciate the good work they do. I cannot remember if I told my class I appreciated their efforts to their faces, but I probably did not. I make it a point to do that these days, but I can always stand to do it more. For that first class, on this front, I consider the most basic component of teaching – making students feel validated for what they do – to be my worst failure. It is simply put an issue of respect. And though I respected them a great deal on the inside, I did not do my job to make sure they
knew of this internal respect. To make it external. To ensure they left my class every day knowing what they did mattered.

There is a time of night when you wake up but cannot fall back asleep. Instead, your mind wanders. And try as you might to steer it in a better direction, your mind inevitably dwells on all the things you have done wrong in this world. Some nights, I think of those students who wrote those first evaluations. My colleagues and bosses tell me not to sweat it, that you can be a great teacher and some classes will just not click with your personality, but I cannot let it go. The thought of any of my students walking out of my class for the last time not realizing how much I do value him/her as a student and as a person destroys me. As an instructor, we all wear masks. Robby the composition teacher is not the same as Robby the non-university person. It happened to be during that first class I taught that my fiancé left me. For many reasons, I should not have been teaching that semester. Finding three comma splices in a row while evaluating a personal academic research paper sent me into an emotional breakdown: if I could not teach students to fix a simple grammatical error in their writing, what hope did I have to convince my lover that I was sorry and to mend our relationship? Many days I only pulled myself out of bed or fought off dropping out of my master’s program with some deluded fantasy of moving back to Texas to chase after the love I lost because of those students: who would teach them if I did not show up to class? By the time I stepped into that room to teach, I had assembled myself into the stern, academic figure they knew and not the young boy who in many ways never recovered from that heartbreak.

Over the years, students have come to me for all sorts of issues. Catching plagiarism in their assignments, not understanding the essay prompt twelve hours before it is due, and realizing they are signed up for the wrong course halfway through the semester. But I have also had conversations when a star basketball player came out to me and when I confronted a strong student who slipped into alcoholism and hard drugs. The most difficult conversation I ever experienced was talking to a good student about her needing to drop out of college because she could no longer afford her medication. In these instances, I take on a Meryl Streep dexterity to hide any sign that the interaction is anything but compassionate neutrality. Realistically, watching a student destruct brings me to tears. I spend hours redesigning lesson plans to infuse music videos, lyrics, film, dance, art, photography, and other media into my course not only because it is a fun thing to do, but also it is the important thing to do. I study millennial learning patterns. I gauge how my students best learn. I revise about fifty percent of my lesson plans that I create the night before class that there has to be a better way to teach these specific students. I care much more than I am professionally allowed to show.

When I was a freshman in college, one of the students in my class took his life a few weeks into the quarter. At the end of the term, I was speaking to the professor and mentioned the tragedy. He replied he had no idea. That moment became the foundation for caring about my students. While that professor could not have saved that student by being more diligent about advertising office hours, perhaps if that professor – as one person in line with the world – reached out more to that young man, he could have been saved. I know some students find my zealousness for office hours strange, but I am only trying to be the change I want to world to inhabit. After all, what is the point of teaching if we cannot even be bothered to know who our students are?

Do my students recognize this? Do they recognize me beyond a figure of authority with a “colorful” past? That I try just as hard as they do in the classroom while simultaneously trying to lead a personal life? That I never in fact have office hours on Fridays, so when I stay and hold them and say it’s no problem, what I am really saying is I don’t want to stay, but I genuinely care about helping you, so I will. Once, the only comment a student wrote on my evaluations was that I came to class sweaty. This was for an 8 A.M. class that I biked five miles to, uphill, three days a week. I do not know if the student meant anything malicious by the comment, but to be told that your perspiration is your biggest distinguishing teaching trait is deflating to say the least. So why teach at all if that is how students will reward your efforts?

I do it because I think of my older brother, who is dyslexic and cognitively challenged. I remember how he struggled all throughout school. Even as a third-grader, I would breeze through my homework
while he stayed up with our parents who were angry over how he could not master the most fundamental of learning concepts. In private, our father once confessed his doubts about my brother being able to graduate college. He used to send me all of his essays, often the night before they were due, and with the same ruthless efficiency I treat my own students’ papers, I returned those essays by morning. He finally graduated with a bachelor’s degree in history – seven years after he was graduated from high school. Seven years of me explaining to my brother the word he means is “tried” and not “tired.” Seven years of threatening that I will stop correcting that mistake the next time he does it because he needs to learn the difference. Seven years of idle threats because at the end it did not matter because the proof of his efforts was the occasional time he sent me his paper two days before it was due. I see my brother in every draft my students have me read, which is why when I say I correct out of love, I genuinely mean it.

But of course I am not allowed to say that. Just as I am not allowed to say to the many females in my class that I am sorry they feel the need to put so much effort into their appearance because our society tells them they have to. That they are all beautiful women who do not need to put on makeup to be the beautiful people they are – no matter what anyone tells them. That they do not have to dumb themselves down to impress the boy sitting next to them. That I understand, as a man, that my sex privileges me over them, and it is absolutely horrible that they must deal with inequality. That I put sexual assault literature in my classroom because I am tired of having women terrorized, and I do not care if I use my class as a soapbox to preach how we, as a male-discourse-driven society, do not respect women. My little sister always calls me when she walks to her car after a late night at the law library in Downtown Los Angeles, and we both pretend the reason she calls is just to say hi. It is not a fluke that at least half of the texts I use in my course are penned by females.

To my male students, I wish I could tell them it is O.K. to be confused, scared, and unsure. That no one in college has all the answers, but so many people pretend that they do. That as a male they will be pressured to do things they do not agree with for the sake of fitting in. That it can be exhausting trying to be a man when you feel you do not measure up to the quarterback. That if a sexual partner is too inebriated to give consent, it is never O.K. to continue. That as people we are all emotional beings, and though society tells us men never cry, men in fact do. That there is nothing wrong with being sensitive and intelligent. That you can and will find love whether or not you know how to throw a football.

I wish I could tell my students I hate grades and do not believe in them. I wish I could tell students that writing well should be the least important thing they walk away from my classroom learning. I wish I could tell my students I try to design my classes to teach them about themselves and about the world. I try to teach them not what to think but how to think. I hope that something in the wide variety of media I show sticks with them for decades to come.

It would be great to be remembered as their favorite teacher. Sometimes this happens but usually not. Usually, I am remembered as the teacher who made them work harder than any other teacher or the teacher who deconstructed a Lady Gaga music video in class. I am fine with that. But if nothing else, I want students to remember how much I believe in them.

Being a teacher in many ways is a sad job because you lose the people you spend a great deal of time caring for, people who often do not see all you do for them. Some students stay in contact, but most do not. I do actually think about my students, years after they have graduated from my course, and wonder what they are doing with their lives. I hope my course has helped them in some small part, but I hope even more they are happy in whatever sense of the word that means to them.

On the very last day of classes, I always ask my students to compose a letter to me. I ask them to say whatever it is they want to say to me. I ask them to write about what grade they think they earned. Part of the reason I have them write this letter is because it is the last thing I read before I assign them their final grades, and I like having a small conversation with them before doing so. But the other reason for this is because these letters become the only mementos I have left of those students. You spend all that time dedicating yourself… and then they just leave. Regardless of what ends up in those letters – meaningful messages that reaffirm my passion for teaching or perfunctory requests for an A – I store them alongside
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my most prized possessions. It is a small thing, but in this way I keep a little memory of everyone who passes through my classroom.

I realize I am far from a perfect person, and so the same must be admitted for my capabilities as a teacher. People ask me why I still teach despite the hours and the (lack of) wage and the at times mediocre evaluations. It would be so much easier to be a more lenient instructor (and help my evaluation scores) or to work nine-to-five like I used to. But the truth is I love what I do because I care about what I do. I care about each of my students and them having the fullest opportunity to learn despite the working conditions I face. I know other people have different approaches and different answers, and that is fine. I do not begrudge others for their choices. When my colleagues picked that superlative for me of most likely to want to teach composition, I felt greatly moved because it is true. I teach composition passionately because I do, not because I am made to. I only hope my students see this too.

When you apply for a teaching job, one of the requirements is often a teaching philosophy. The goal of this document is to explain your teaching style, pedagogy, and abilities in a thousand words or less. Think of it as the question an employer might ask in an interview along the lines of what is your biggest weakness? If you answer anything except for I have the tendency to work too much, which is to say give an honest answer regarding your shortcomings, you are a fool. In the same way, telling a university you have been known to make students feel unappreciated is an honest answer by a fool.

Why I am then telling you this is because what I think a teaching philosophy should do, in more than a thousand words, is explain who it is you are as a person and who it is you want to become. At the moment, I consider myself an instructor who enjoys being in the classroom. An instructor who is unique but prone to bravado out of insecurity, dedicated but has the tendency to judge others unfairly, without judging himself first. And where do I envision this flawed individual ending up?

My greatest inspiration in the classroom is Liviu Librescu. If you do not know his name, a simple Google search will turn up his story. He was one of the victims of the Virginia Tech Massacre. While each lost life that day was a tragedy, the reason his story has remained with me is due to how he died. As a seventy-six-year-old Holocaust survivor, Mr. Librescu met his end by blockading the door to his classroom with his body so that the gunman could not enter the class. While securing the door, his students jumped from the windows; all but one student escaped – and the gunman only forced himself in after Mr. Librescu had been shot five times. The lethal blow was to the head.

I do not believe in a heaven, but if there is one, I know this man would be there. And while I have never met him, I am sure if you asked him if he had any regrets in life, his response would be that he did not have the strength to hold the door just a little longer for that last student.

From an ethical perspective, you could make the argument that Mr. Librescu should have had the right to be the first person out of those windows. He already survived one horror. He had a family and an accomplished career that would probably not be rivaled by any student in that class. Of all people to hold a door, would not a seventy-six-year-old be the worst candidate in a room full of young people who were much stronger? On a purely logistical level, which is often how decisions are made behind the scenes at universities, his actions do not make sense. But the reason he immediately told his students to flee while springing for the door without giving the matter a second thought is the same reason Professor Jocelyne Couture-Nowak, a professor who met a similar fate blockading the door to her own class that day, sacrificed her life.

If I am giving the impression that teaching involves sacrifice, then I am doing my job here correctly. While I hope it never comes to it in mine or any other teacher’s life, I have considered what would happen if I found myself in a Virginia Tech situation while teaching. In fact, one of the first things I do when I am assigned a class is go to the classroom (before the term starts) to check if there is a lock on the door, where the windows are, and how I would get students to safety. At no time do I consider where I could hide.

This does not make me a martyr. Say I were in a restaurant and a gunman opened fire, my first thoughts would be how do I get out of here in one piece to the people I love? No fantasies of saving the
day. Yes, I would help people in that situation, but I will strongly admit my will to survive is selfish. So what changes when I step into a classroom?

These days one of the hot topics issues of my field, and I am sure it is the same across many academic disciplines, is adjunct and graduate student pay/conditions. I read articles all the time about what is to be done, and a common refrain is to do less. Grade less so that you can spend more time writing the book that will earn you a tenure-track position. Spend less time in office hours so that you can work a second job to pay off your student debt. Even though this is not my solution, I cannot harangue someone for cutting corners in order to buy food.

My solution is to be taken. It is not an easy one, and it is not a practical one: but it is my way of getting up each morning and feeling I am earning my place in this world. Rather than fight a system that is swallowing me piece by piece, I will give a hundred percent until the day I have no choice but to sacrifice quality or do something else. In that case, whenever it may be, I will do something else.

You see, this is not about a compositionist in the humanities. Mr. Librescu taught engineering; Mrs. Couture-Nowak taught French. When it comes to the greatest teachers, what crosses disciplines is ability to give beyond yourself when there is no reason to. This does not mean we should accept poor working conditions, but it does mean, for me, that we cannot let said conditions deprive our students of the best possible experience we can offer. This problematic situation is often posed as one of how to survive, but in truth there is a beauty in failing for a cause. No one can make you sacrifice yourself, and you are no less a teacher because you choose not to. After all, I am male: there is a long history of our society expecting women to sacrifice themselves for children, husbands, family commitments, etc. If I cut corners professionally, the reason is understood; if a woman needs an evening away from her children for personal reasons, she is selfish. I fully acknowledge that my philosophy for working through these difficulties could easily change if I were held in a constant position to sacrifice, i.e., if I were not male.

So often our society is bombarded with stereotypes of teachers. The cold/disinterested science professor who mumbles in front of a chalkboard and is only in it for the research. The glorified babysitter who complains she does not earn enough when she only has to work nine months out of the year. It is only when tragedies occur, such as the one that occurred at Virginia Tech, that these stereotypes are silenced, and the public truly appreciates, if but for a moment, beyond our skills the great love and dedication people in our field bring with us. While we do not hear of many incidences of Mr. Librescu’s and Mrs. Couture-Nowak’s, it is because of circumstance. I am proud to be part of a profession in which the majority of people, regardless of their age, abilities, family commitments, or whatever reason you could come up with to be the first out of that window, would lay down their lives for others if they were in such a situation.

And though we may only hear about these sacrifices when they are the ultimate forms, educators across all levels make smaller sacrifices, which are no less meaningful, for their students every day. One of the students who escaped thanks to Mr. Librescu’s sacrifice said afterward: “He’s a part of my life now and forever. I’m changed. I’m not the person I was before Monday.” It does not take death to make such a statement ring true. I am confident all of us can apply these same words to those teachers who gave to us on so many levels without ever asking anything in return.

So to any future possible employer, this is who I am. You can proverbially spit in my face with the salary you offer me. You can devalue my work by expanding my classroom size. Should you do such things, I will not go gently into that good night. But I promise I will never let those things detract from my responsibilities to my students. And if ever comes the day when I cannot give what is necessary, then I will go before you take my greatest asset: my love for teaching students.

Some nights I imagine what would happen if all the educators who felt they could not give their students what is necessary walked away all at once, together. My biggest concern is that it would yield an exodus so great that it would bring the education system to its knees by drawing attention to substantial problems plaguing our system across all academic levels. My biggest hope is the exact same thing.