

NEA: Pathways to Global Communication

Reflective Portfolio: Rebecca Collier

English & Communication Studies Department

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Part I: Reflecting on Theory, Practice, and Communication

Teaching Philosophy

Each semester I begin my classes with an inaugural speech to the students about the importance of the journey we will commence together. I remind them that they may change their majors, they will likely change their careers, and some of them will even change entire industries one day. However, the skills we are working on in their communication courses will support them every endeavor, both professionally and personally, for the rest of their lives. These classes are worth investing in.

Of course, if the students are expected to make an investment of time, effort, and money, it is my responsibility to make the coursework and class time worth their while. I take this responsibility seriously, and continue to update my skills through training and research. Where possible, I incorporate technology to allow students to access assignments and other class materials. I try to save the time we have together in class for the most beneficial work requiring the presence of the professor and/or the other classmates.

I structure my classes to be as student-centered as possible. I plan, not what I will cover, but what the students will do. I teach them to analyze, apply and synthesize their learning. I guide them in generating questions that will lead, not only to correct answers, but to genuine discoveries. My teaching philosophy centers on instigating these “ah-ha” moments for students. Every time someone makes a connection, even a small one, and I hear, “I never thought about it that way before,” I am reminded why I chose this occupation.

As a professor, I set high academic standards for my students. Still, I can testify to the efficacy of the curriculum. If the students will do all that I ask, they will make measurable

progress in their course. I build small assessments early on in the class to help the students gain confidence in their abilities and track their improvement. When critiquing an assignment or a presentation, I always begin with praise. I want the students to feel encouraged, and to feel safe trying out something new and difficult. My purpose is not to tear them down, but to refine their skills. My hope is that they will learn to take raw ideas and translate these into cohesive and cogent deliverables. That hope keeps me motivated through the challenges.

Although there are difficult days, I find great joy in teaching. I love building a classroom community, and getting to know these amazing students as people. I ask about their lives and their interests, and I share some personal information about myself to build a connection. I encourage them to reach out to each other for help with questions about the class or the coursework, and I enjoy watching them become friends and develop networks of support with each other. When they share information with me, I try to remember to follow up. “Were you able to drop that class?” “Did you find a new babysitter?” “How are you feeling today?” I want the students to know that our course does not exist in a vacuum. They should feel confident expressing a personal perspective or opinion with our class, knowing that each individual plays a valuable role in the learning experience for our group.

Teaching is not easy. It demands much, and it seems to give little. It does not promise financial incentives or societal acclaim. It will require reserves of patience, fortitude and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Yet it is much more than a means of earning a living; it is a way of life. Those who follow this path will find intangible and immeasurable rewards. It is a special kind of love.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: Benefits and Challenges

One of the things I enjoy the most about teaching at FIT is the high percentage of international students in each class. These students add a global perspective to our discussions, along with a fresh point of view on American culture and ideology. This is especially helpful in communication courses, where we do some elementary analysis of intonation patterns and language structure. Students who are native speakers of languages other than English can provide real-life examples for what we are studying.

However, there are some challenges that come with students who are English language learners. They sometimes share with me in private that they are not confident speaking out in class, because they are pronouncing words incorrectly or because they lack the vocabulary to adequately express their ideas. Some of these students have difficulty understanding readings assignments, or they miss questions on a test or a quiz, not for lack of knowledge, but because they misunderstood the question. These students may need additional tutoring services to help them achieve grades that adequately reflect their understanding of the course material. As an instructor, I find myself grading their written assignments differently from those of students who are native speakers of English, and I'm not sure that this is fair.

However, the NEA workshop gave me some strategies to use in working with linguistically diverse students. Although we teach an American-culture based style of Public Speaking, I acknowledge that other cultures have different standards. We now discuss how the American-style Public Speaking techniques we learn in class are what they will be evaluated on for a grade, other standards may apply in different cultures and contexts. I also feel more confident about accepting grammar and syntax American English errors from my English language learner students. I make a note of the issues, and I pay special attention to patterns of

mistakes, and I allow students to re-write things when the meaning is unclear to me. I also am now trying to include more global diversity in the examples and visual aids that I use during class.

Part II: Moving Theory into Practice: Diversity as Resource

Changed Assignment

One assignment that I changed after these workshops was my Persuasive Speech assignment. The sample outline that I provided used the Pledge of Allegiance as an attention-getter, and it included a few American idioms that would not be intuitive for all cultures. I am still developing my new sample outline, but I am carefully going through it to make sure the topic, main points, and supporting materials are relevant to the diverse community of students here at FIT.

Also, as a result of this workshop, I am adding in a new assignment. The first chapter of our Public Speaking textbook gives a brief history of how this art form emerged and developed. To give a more global perspective to the course, I will assign students small groups to do some additional research about the pedagogy of speaking in public from different parts of the world. For example, some of the earliest records of public speaking instruction are found in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Other models developed in Greece and Rome, while China had very different emergent criteria for oral communication. The students will share their research, and we'll compare the roots of this field across cultures with the modern, American approach laid out in our textbook. I hope this will help the students understand how culture shapes communication and affects our perception of competency.

Part II: Teaching Goals Statement

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to be part of the NEA workshops here at FIT. They have helped me uncover cultural biases in my teaching materials and language. Over the next few years, I hope to revisit all of my PowerPoints, lesson notes, quizzes, tests, assignment guides, and sample assignments to check that my work reflects a diversity of cultures. I want to make sure I am putting American culture into context, and not assuming that students will share my cultural norms and values.