

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

The success of every class hinges on engagement – on engaged students, engaging material, and an engaged teacher. As the instructor, I seek to create an environment that entices students to become invested in the texts. Students in my classes interact with the material and reimagine the narratives they encounter through a range of individual and group exercises. Active student participation is dependent on my ability to assign appropriate exercises, to moderate discussions with both enthusiasm and composure, and to prepare alternative plans for each class session, as the students' level of understanding and interest will inevitably oscillate. According to evaluations, I do manage to motivate my students. One student from a Fall 2013 class wrote: "He is a great speaker and is always trying to find new ways to engage the class. He is also very helpful." Another one comments: "Enjoyable literature class, the discussion system he uses actually makes me want to participate more often."

Above all, I believe that students ought to tell their own stories. In one class, after we read a graphic novel by a young Arab American about his experiences while growing up in the United States, students spent a few minutes during class considering which medium they would choose to narrate their own lives. Some drew images, one student composed a haiku, and another one wrote an outline for a more traditional autobiography. Students in my current upper-level American Studies class are preparing multimodal projects about their perspectives on the events of September 11. They are creating videos, short stories, or paintings; eventually, they will reflect upon their contribution in a one-page written report, which they additionally turn into an oral presentation.

In the same course, I recently asked students – following a discussion about an essay on remembrance at "Ground Zero" – to envision a 9/11 memorial, pretending for the purposes of this assignment that none had been built yet. Working in groups, they had to take into account the divergent interests and ideas of individuals and institutions affected by the events. This exercise, which some groups used to conduct research online and other groups to sketch architectural models on paper, sparked a lively discussion on the political import of memorials and memory culture more generally. We were thus able to move seamlessly from specific arguments about September 11 and its victims to the broader challenges of commemoration. An in-class exercise that required (and fostered) creativity therefore also engendered the examination of ethical and cultural conflicts.

As these examples indicate, I frequently turn the tables and ask the students to share their own insights about the ideas and concerns raised by a text. Even in my larger classes, I only occasionally lecture for brief periods of time. Typically, I invite students to work in groups for a few minutes at some point during a class, in order to allow less confident students to prepare responses to questions about the readings. Moreover, as some of the assigned material in both my lower-level and my upper-level courses is quite complex, group work allows students to share their interpretations and learn from each other. When we discussed Léopold Senghor's demanding poetry in my World Literature course, students "translated" individual poems line by line, providing a concise – if less refined – version of the lyrics by noting what they understood the verses to mean. After discussing Pablo Neruda's "Walking Around", students worked on their own with the poem, blacking out parts of it, thus constructing individual versions. In a recent class on Dante's *Inferno*, groups were assigned different questions; after pondering the question for ten minutes, students reported back to the entire class, conveying their thoughts on the role of Virgil or on the concept of retribution (*contrappasso*). Such exercises gently push students to assume responsibility of analyzing a text, but they form also part and parcel of my endeavor to change pace several times per class; this

strategy serves to maintain the students' attention, but it also encourages them to view a text (or movie) from various angles.

Even apparent failures can generate positive teaching moments. During one class, I had students – divided into groups – videotape responses to various African American folktales. Most students were too shy to readily embrace this exercise. I later decided to incorporate a similar video project into my current World Literature course, though this time as a group work assignment to be completed outside the classroom. Another challenging situation arose when a website I used for a timeline caused numerous problems for students, as the site regularly experienced outages. Rather than having students use an unreliable website, I transferred the relevant information into a Google Drive document, a decision that proved valuable at the end of the semester, as students modified this document in class during a productive review session.

I thus constantly reevaluate assignments, and I indeed understand each class as an opportunity to develop new teaching strategies and improve established methods. My openness to new instructional techniques mirrors my desire to help students appreciate novel socio-cultural perspectives within the texts they read. One of my World Literature students noted: “Professor Arnsperger is very cultured. He is open-minded, which is the type of teacher you want when you are learning about different cultures through literature.” I encourage intellectual openness and self-reflection in my students. I invite them to embrace the foreignness of diverse texts, but I also aim to have them recognize that dissimilar cultures share similar conflicts and concerns. They discover their story in radically “alien” stories, and they in turn shape these stories with their own story.