

Scott O'Neil—Statement of Teaching Philosophy

I was a high school teacher before I was a literary scholar, and I consider teaching to be an immensely important part of my life and my professional identity. Over the last thirteen years, I have taught students in both rural and urban environments, first generation college students, international students including classes specifically for English Language Learners, working professionals, and prep school standouts. I have taught those students at small private schools, research-oriented schools, public institutions, and digitally, including several classes that took place entirely online. Through that variety of experiences, I am now prepared to teach a wide array of courses including composition, introductory surveys of early English literature, and seminars on topics including Shakespeare, Renaissance and/or medieval drama, Arthurian romance, film, theory, and more. My contribution as a teacher is based on the core educational philosophy that has guided my career, a philosophy that views intelligence as situational and understands that every person has the capacity to be the most—or the least—intelligent person in the room, depending on the room.

In driving home this notion of situational intelligence, I encourage my students to never see themselves or their peers as “stupid.” Rather, I want them all to engage in the class as a group of specialists in a wide variety of fields. Only through the application of their distinct experiences can we, as a class, fully engage with our course topic. One of my aims as an educator is to encourage students to find ways to engage with literary texts through the skills and interests that they already bring into the room. This frequently takes the form of an interdisciplinary approach, as I've found that some of the best student work I have received has been the result of a process wherein students have a voice in the construction of the assignment itself. More often than not, students engage with the texts on a deeper level than they otherwise would have, and they deliver projects that I never would have thought to assign. One of my Shakespeare students, for example, was passionate about the culinary arts. He proposed a final project around his interest in food and presentation. Being of woeful culinary skill myself, I was initially skeptical, but we worked on a set of expectations, and he ended up delivering a phenomenal final project: an analysis of 16th century food cultures and class standing in Verona, Italy, complete with an array of contemporary dishes. He used that research in order to offer a new reading of the Capulet banquet in *Romeo and Juliet*.

This sense of communal discovery and individual expertise continues in my composition classroom. I try to find ways to open up literature and writing to my students by choosing topics that seem familiar. My writing courses start from these seemingly simple concepts and then go about defamiliarizing those concepts by asking a “founding question.” For example, in my “Comic Books

and the Rhetoric of Nationalism" class, we tracked the comic book representations of women, people of color, and LGBT characters from the 1940s through today, generating discussions on how this "purely American" art form was often used to reify—and eventually challenge—racist, sexist, and homophobic narratives. The entire course began with the question of what it means for something to be "purely American" and to question whether everyone would define that concept the same way. From that inquiry-based beginning, I aim to create opportunities to explore topics from a wide variety of texts and genres, including commercials, film, video games, art, music, and more, in the hopes that at some point in the semester, every student will be able to be the expert in the room. I enjoy learning from my student experts, as they often come up with approaches to our topics that I never would have considered. One student, a statistics and economics major from China who had never read an American comic book in his life, constructed his own mathematical formula based on his analyses of the most valuable comic books on the market. His formula took several variables into account, including paper quality, publication numbers, and thematic content, and he used it to make an argument about which contemporary comic books would likely have the highest financial yield for investor-collectors. It was one of the most fascinating papers I've had the privilege to read.

One of my pedagogical contributions to an English department is my background in performance pedagogy, an approach designed to give students the performative tools to see literary texts in different and engaging ways. I've been developing this performance-centered pedagogical approach for nearly a decade, as a result of my ongoing working relationship with the education wing of the Folger Shakespeare Library. I utilize performance-based pedagogy as often as possible in order to help the students create ownership of the texts while having fun at the same time. For example, in "Dispelling the Dark Ages," a course I designed in the summer of 2016, students were tasked with taking the same scene from *Doctor Faustus* and cutting it for performance. While the cuts are easy at first, the discussions among students get almost contentious when the final cuts need to be made, as students defend their favorite lines in the scene. By means of a performance-based activity, students end up doing a thorough close reading without even realizing that that's what they are doing.

I left high school teaching in search of a better balance between teaching and research. The goal was to find a pedagogical situation where the research fueled the teaching and vice versa. As someone newly on the job search, I am seeking just such an institution.

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