

Teaching Philosophy: Erin Dietel-McLaughlin

All of my teaching endeavors—with undergraduates, graduate students, and youth, in traditional classrooms and digitally-mediated environments—are connected by two core pedagogical beliefs. First, I believe that mentoring and reciprocity are vital to sustaining a vibrant, diverse, more democratic learning environment. Second, I believe that educators have a responsibility to prepare students for meaningful participation in an increasingly multimodal society. These beliefs underscore an approach to teaching that is deeply connected not only to my research interests in the connections between literacy, democracy, and new media, but also to my experiences as a non-traditional student.

I owe much of my educational success to the generosity and support of several mentors—from advisers who helped me learn the ropes of research as a McNair Scholar, to the seasoned instructors who shared tips and resources during my first year of teaching, to the faculty members and student colleagues who helped orient me as a doctoral student to the many facets of scholarly work. These mentors not only shared their expertise, but also were eager for me to bring my own experiences, practices, and perspectives to the conversation. I strive to continue this tradition by adopting a mentoring approach to teaching.

To me, a mentoring approach to teaching first involves giving students permission to think of themselves as experts. My syllabus for a recent Intermediate Writing course reflects this approach by not only expecting students to facilitate classroom discussions throughout the term, but also by privileging the texts students produce, the experiences that shape the production of those texts, and the critical perspectives students bring to their interpretation of those texts and other cultural artifacts. Mentoring also means helping students to live in the intersection between theory and practice by reconciling difficult concepts with what students already know about their own lives and identities. This intersection is an important part of many teaching contexts, whether brainstorming classroom strategies with graduate teaching assistants (as in my experience mentoring first-year instructors), or figuring out what it means to construct a digital identity (as in my experience co-directing the Digital Mirror Camp for Girls). Throughout my teaching, I try to foster a strong spirit of collaboration through the frequent use of group workshops and peer feedback sessions, as well as in my individual conferences with students, and I welcome opportunities to involve students in the assessment of their progress and the course as a whole. In short, the focus on mentoring and reciprocity in my teaching means that I don't do things *to* my students; instead, we do things together as we learn from one another.

Closely related to this principle is my belief that literacy—the meaning-making practices of a literate society—carries profound connections to citizenship and community participation. Participation in a community usually requires the ability to effectively perform that community's language. Yet while the traditional classroom has long privileged alphabetic texts, new media culture demands that students extend their analysis to not only print and text-driven documents, but also new media and image-driven texts. In response, my courses are designed to help students develop multiple literacies by asking students to work not only with print-based texts, but also with new media such as blogs, videos, and web-authoring tools, and to consider the impact that writing and reading in these modes may have for the student's own meaning-making practices and community participation.

Ultimately, in a culture where students are so often regarded as mere consumers of prefabricated information, my goal is to encourage students to be agents in their own learning and to see themselves as citizens in a larger network of communities, rather than as “just” students. My hope is that students leave the educational environment with increased confidence in themselves as writers, thinkers, and community participants—a confidence that will sustain them through the many discursive arenas of their lives.