

Personal Statement: Erin McQuiston

My teaching is predicated on the belief that literature should be accessible to the widest possible range of students. My goal as a teacher is to model an approach to reading and writing which avoids the ivory tower effect, and gives future engineers as well as future English majors the vocabulary and skills to engage with what they read. In my classroom, reading and writing are opportunities to learn the process and pleasures of wordcraft.

I find that many students arrive in my class with the idea that writing is something that one is either “good” or “bad” at. I believe that it is one of my tasks as their instructor to show them that writing is not an instinct or an inborn skill; I emphasize that writing is a process, not a product. I begin the course by illustrating this with the analogy of learning to play a musical instrument. While the occasional prodigy may pick up a violin for the first time and play it perfectly, the vast majority of musicians begin by learning the mechanics and basic techniques of their instruments. Writing, just like any other learned skill, requires practice as well as creativity. For this reason, drafting and peer reviewing are a major part of my pedagogy. The completed work should be enriched by an understanding of the process that produced it.

However, I also stress that appreciating the constructedness of writing should not overshadow the pleasure of reading. When teaching literature I engage in a constant balancing act, working to be an agent of demystification while not losing sight of the aesthetic beauty of the literature. My ultimate goal is to foster curiosity and enjoyment. While I recognize the clear benefits of teaching theme and close reading, I do not want my students to leave the classroom with the idea that reading is simply a decoding process overseen by an academic authority figure. I want students to experience not only the achievement of unpacking the meaning of texts, but also the pleasure to be found in a vivid, well-crafted turn of phrase or image. This attention to enjoying literature is especially important when teaching students who are skeptical of, or even intimidated by, the idea that reading requires specialized training.

One of my particular teaching challenges has been tailoring my approach for students who read and write English as a second language. One-sixth of the undergraduates at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign are international students, and it is common for me to teach classes in which every third student is not a native English speaker. These students often have a very firm grasp of the structural and grammatical elements of the language, but are intimidated by the complex system of connotations, metaphors and synonyms in which so much of the beauty of literature and writing can be found. An emphasis on “hidden meanings” can be alienating for these students. I find that my focus on language as craft rather than conspiracy helps them feel included in classroom conversation; their existing knowledge of grammar and syntax can be applied productively to help expand their understanding of literature.

My hope is that at the end of my courses my students walk away not only with the tools to read and write at their highest level, but with the urge to continue doing so long after they receive their final grades and graduate.