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Teaching Statement

The questions of what literature is, what it does, and who it serves are never purely academic in my teaching. Instead, my goal in any course is to give my students the tools to explore the ambiguities that give texture and color to literary history. To do this, I design my courses to give students a structured and inclusive space in which to ask questions, express confusion, recognize difference, and reflect on the meanings and uses of literature and literacy. Rather than treat “literature” as a restrictive space of sacralization and expertise, I work hard to find creative ways to reflect back my students’ own creativity when it comes to their encounters with texts. By incorporating lessons in reading practice with lessons on reading’s histories, I help students understand how the methods of literary study—reading and writing—are powerful meaning-making tools.

To prime students to think critically not only about what they are reading, but also about how they read and why, I include a “reading policy” section on my literature course syllabi. I consider this policy, which explains my expectations for the reading that I ask student to do, a central part of my efforts to make my classrooms more accessible spaces for students of different educational backgrounds and abilities, especially those for whom a syllabus full of longer texts may seem unfamiliar or intimidating. My reading policy acknowledges that reading takes time, even as it asks them to do all of the reading. I explain that this investment of time and attention affords certain benefits (and even pleasures!) that are crucial to the overall aims of our course, not least of which is simply learning to make time for immersive activities like reading. To this end, I also explain my preference for reading in paper formats rather than on screens, a policy that I supplement with links to relevant research on reading in different media. By starting my courses with a frank conversation about reading, I have found that I can not only help my students refine and reflect on their reading practices, but I can also revise my own assumptions about how students engage with texts. As my policy gives students explicit permission to skim, to get caught up in the plot, to love or hate characters, or even to get bored, it also gives them implicit permission to fit our course reading into their lives however they can and to share those experiences. I had one student share with the class the dissonance she felt as she read *Woman Warrior* while working a busy Saturday night shift at a campus pizzeria, and another who, after listening to *The Sound and the Fury* on her hour-long commute to and from campus, had an oblique perspective on the novel’s play with form. Rather than discount these experiences as idiosyncratic or digressive, I make space for them in class discussion as a reminder that one of the best parts of “reading” is that it does not look the same for everyone. Consequently, my reading policy has provided me and my students with vivid lessons in the value of diversity, as the abundant reading practices that students bring to bear ultimately yield more engaged and engaging insights into the texts we read together.

My reading policy is designed to acknowledge the different forms of work that go into reading, but it also serves as a foundation upon which I can build student competence and confidence in the particular work of crafting literary readings. While I invite students to read however they can, I do insist that they come to every class prepared to discuss one moment from the day’s assigned reading in depth. I help students prepare for this discussion through a daily low-stakes notecard assignment. For each class period, I ask students to write down a single quotation from the day’s reading on one side of an index card and a reflective analysis of the quotation that fills the other side. The quotation can be anything that the student finds interesting,

challenging, confusing, or remarkable. These notecards give students repeated practice in the first steps of any close reading—training their attention on a single part of a text—while also acknowledging that I do not expect them to read *every* line of a novel or story this way. By asking students to focus on quotations that resonate with them personally, I also reinforce the idea that “close reading” is not simply a catalogue of literary devices, but a way of accounting for the complexity of a text’s effects on a reader. As with the reading policy, my instruction also benefits from the notecard assignment, as it provides me a constant stream of feedback from students. I can share patterns I see in the moments or themes that students are selecting, or bring up reactions or interpretations that may merit more unpacking in class. I also value being able to hear from and respond to students who otherwise shy away from sharing their thoughts out loud in a larger classroom setting. This iterative exercise in selectively attentive reading thus helps me show students how to develop more reflective reading habits that can serve as a springboard for both informal discussions and more formal analyses of texts.

My instruction in intensive reading practices is always balanced with lessons that introduce students to broader questions about the material lives of books and literary history, frameworks that further spur student thinking about how the political and cultural stakes of “literature” develop, change, and persist over time. In a lesson on Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, for instance, I introduce students to the interpretive dilemma posed by the novel’s two published endings: one that encourages a reading of Clare’s sudden fall as “Death by misadventure,” the other that ends more malevolently, “Then everything was dark.” For many students, the idea that a modern, mass-mediated novel exists simultaneously in two states is a disorienting introduction to textual uncertainty, so I help students come to terms with the novel’s variable endings by framing the issue in more familiar terms. First, we read and discuss a scholarly essay that considers the mystery of the novel’s two endings in terms of the conditions of African American female authorship in the 1920s. With this historical story in mind, students then work in groups to analyze some of the covers and blurbs that appear on modern versions of the novella. These extra-authorial paratexts are more familiar to students than the concept of a “crux,” and yet many students note that they have not thought much before about how such residues of the publishing and marketing process may affect their reading of what is between the covers. Inviting students to read *Passing* by its cover thus helps complicate notions of authority, textuality, and reputation, especially at the intersection of race and gender. I have developed similar lessons around the material histories of other novels: for example, asking students to consider how publishers’ ads for *Native Son* framed the novel differently in mainstream versus African American newspapers, or using an online resource like the University of Virginia’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Culture* multimedia archive to bring students into virtual contact with the novel’s complicated material legacies. With this mixed approach that considers not just “texts,” but also “books,” I provide students with a model for performing their own smaller-scale research projects in which they can marry textual analysis with more contextual questions about how “literature” is produced and consumed.

The students who come through my classrooms are all readers and writers, but they are by no means the same in how they use reading and writing to negotiate their different relationships to literature and to the world. By eschewing a one-reading-fits-all philosophy of literature and by building frameworks for attentive curiosity, I make my classroom a space in which students can learn how to ask and pursue questions that matter to them about reading, writing, and history.