

Teaching as a Practice of Inquiry: Allowing Something to Be Said
Teaching Philosophy for Randall Cream

The guide and goal of my teaching is the transformative power of inquiry. Inquiry, as part of a questioning stance in the world, is an inextricable component of ethical life. I teach as part of my own process of inquiry, and I try to design and build classes that facilitate others' attempts to inquire, to think & to learn. This philosophy of teaching—that teaching consists of moments of inquiry and questioning—seems so obvious as to be almost trite; of course our classes teach students to inquire. But for questioning to become ethical it must be more than just a deferred *telos*; it must surface as a daily art. If we believe that learning is coextensive with seeking, we must adopt questioning, we must practice questioning, we must teach through questioning our materials, our students, and ourselves. I try to put this belief into practice each class for all of my students, mostly because (a) I can't imagine any other way to model and practice the desire to learn, but also because (b) I can only barely control my own impetus to question, and teaching provides a convenient productive channel for that ineluctable desire. In every course, from introductory surveys and first-year writing seminars to upper division classes and graduate seminars devoted to specialized topics, I work to share with my students the use of questioning as an ethical response to the human condition, and a social act that conjoins self to other.

Asking questions is a relatively trivial part of teaching, and one easily incorporated into many approaches. Allowing students to answer questions is something else—or perhaps I should say, asking questions which require and allow the possibility of an *authentic* answer is a problem confronting us every time we relate to a class. Questioning can be radical and liberating, but can also be simply banal—as routinely modeled in popular media, often teachers “ask” students “questions” that are merely poorly disguised attempts to instrumentalize students as passive recipients. Questions that already have an answer, that need not be answered, that aren't really asked, are never inquisitive; students invariably refuse to respond to them. True questioning, though, is an inherently dangerous act. In “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics,” Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that any real question invites an answer that can arise as a moment of surprise, a moment of transcendence, if the questioner can allow the openness of an answer. For the problem is, “we cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting to let something be said.” Gadamer's distinction speaks to the gap between questions that only sustain and fulfill our own preconceptions, and those questions that truly inquire. Every field has its own undecidedness, its own unanswered and disputed questions; we as scholars work with these questions intimately and as a matter of course. When we interact with disciplinary material in our own work—watch a film, read a poem, play a game, read an essay—we necessarily juxtapose that material with these sorts of questions. We continually revitalize the discipline for ourselves by interrogating its material for ourselves, according to our own demands and our own questions. The challenge for us is to turn every class into just such an opportunity for our students, if they so choose.

Students recognize immediately a course that is designed to facilitate giving them information, and respond appropriately to the alienation and distancing inherent in such a presupposition. In my experience, students also recognize and respect a course that invites inquiry as a self-directed act. For some students, there is an initial pause as they confront their own expectations and decide to accept or reject the challenge of learning as a self-directed and self-measured act. This is appropriate; if inquiry is inherently ethical, then no one is able to choose inquiry for another. But the result of leading each class as a moment of inquiry, for oneself and one's students, can be startling. Inquiry is troubled, and messy, and unpredictable; it can invite students to move across boundaries into the unfamiliar. At South Carolina, I've been fortunate to encounter a fairly regular stream of students—a few graduate students, but many more undergraduates—who have voluntarily undertaken the practice of questioning in their own educational life, and have sought to work with me as these projects move beyond the classroom into a more sustained project. This has helped me to work across the disciplines with students from Engineering, Biology, Art, Information Science, Philosophy, and Computer Science. Their questions incite my research and teaching. When I plan a course, it is with this end: can I present the material in such a way to enable and invite surprise, questioning, and to allow (for those who so choose) the course to become a moment of self-initiated wonder. I am not always as successful as I might wish, but I always try.