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I begin this statement with a dead language and an epiphany.

In struggling—in graduate school—with both articulating my philosophy of teaching and with Latin grammar, I realized that (despite its difficulties), Latin has, surprisingly, helped me to articulate what drives my teaching. For me, *liber*—the Latin for both “a free person, one who is not a slave,” and also the word for “book”—epitomizes my understanding of education’s power, a power rooted in the connections between freedom and knowledge. I start with my *liber*-epiphany because I believe that attention to the historical ground from which our educational system and values grow is as key to elucidating what we do as teacher-scholars as it is to the foundation of my own pedagogical aims and methods. These connections illuminate for me the elements—humor and open discussion, critical and creative thinking, appreciation of multiple perspectives, confidence, and transdisciplinary inquiry—that I seek to foster in my students.

I believe in the rhetorical and argumentative power of humor: laughter has the ability to unite, and its selective and intentional use can encourage critical thought and open discussion by removing feelings of judgment of or competition between differing viewpoints. Certainly, I strive to teach with humor, in order to engage my students and to make both in-class and digital course materials more welcoming, but, more to the point, I often also teach humor. For example, in my survey of early British Literature, students regularly choose, for their final exams, the option of composing their own “Satire Cookbook Recipe,” inspired by and drawing on class discussion of Johnathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal.” These recipes tackle a contemporary social issue of the student’s choosing; students satirize everything from the American Dream to the rise in Anti-Asian hate in connection with COVID-19. Similarly, students in my Shakespeare course compose their own memes, using humor and a familiar medium to begin communicating their own, personal readings of select plays. These approaches not only engage learners, they also are capable of prompting open thought on and productive dialogue about complex works and concepts.

I have also found that humorous examples and activities encourage creative and critical thinking. For example, when teaching the Proposal genre in my Composition class, I spend a day combining audience analysis, critical thinking, and argumentation—with zombies. In this particular lesson, my students and I bring our skills together to outline and partially draft a proposal arguing that a pacifist splinter cell living in a post-(zombie) apocalyptic world should adopt the survival rules put forth by the main character of the film *Zombieland*. Almost without fail, the majority of the students begin this lesson thinking I have set them an impossible task. I open by reviewing the main concepts we need to construct an effective proposal and then I set the class to work in small groups. Each group is asked to begin by conducting an audience analysis of the splinter cell—I ask the students to think about what these individuals need and value, and what their attitudes towards survival rules involving zombie killing might be. After a short time, I can walk around the room and hear students excitedly debating how they might persuade the pacifists. Soon, we come back together to begin crafting our proposal; as we write, we consider how to structure our argument and how to convince our audience—discussing everything from rhetorical appeals and evidence use to the question of whether a zombie “counts” as a human. Finally, we generate a detailed outline of what regularly turns out to be a thoughtful, persuasive, and occasionally hilarious argument about what it means to be human and to live ethically.

In addition to challenging students to think and work creatively and expansively, I find that using popular culture, like *Zombieland*, in the classroom helps students feel more knowledgeable and confident about what they are learning. Drawing connections between the cultural products students know and those they often find intimidating or reject as boring—particularly in respect to historical

texts—helps to show the ways our contemporary moment is informed by and yet differs from the past. By engaging the familiar, I hope to make the strange seem less alienating, and, in teaching premodern texts in literature classes, I use these connections to show students how older works frequently engage ideas we still wrestle with today. For example, when teaching *Beowulf*, I wrap-up the week’s discussion by showing students some of the #Wulf4Ham *Beowulf*/*Hamilton: An American Musical* mashup tweets that appeared on Twitter in 2016. We discuss not only how tweets, such as: “Grendel: I want to be in the mead hall where it happens,” help us to better understand the Old English poem’s characters, but also why we read *Beowulf* in the first place. The class then concludes with the students writing their own *Beowulf* tweets, with examples such as Grendel’s “@ThanesPD, I would like to report a noise complaint at the mead hall” or the Dragon’s “@cup\_stealer, COME AT ME BRO #fire #100.” This gives students an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the poem’s major themes and key components, using a medium with which they often find themselves more comfortable. It is my belief that bringing historical texts and contemporary contexts together both aids students in interpreting and understanding older works and highlights the productive similarities and differences between premodern and contemporary thinking and expression.

Further, I believe that education, at its best and truest, provides all people with the facility for expressing their own experiences and the wish and opportunity to hear the voices and opinions of others. As a teacher, I bring as many different and diverse voices into the classroom as possible, both in terms of the authors and readings I select and through my efforts to create a space where students of color, students with disabilities, students of all gender identities and/or who identify as LGBTQ+, and students from a variety of socioeconomic and religious backgrounds feel comfortable in and capable of communicating their unique opinions and ideas. I view courses on reading and writing as particularly well-suited to developing students’ confidence in their own voices and their capacity to hear and appreciate the perspectives of others. As such, I incorporate strategies—such as small group discussion and free writes—that assist all learners in building confidence and sharing their perspectives; indeed, one student writes: “I was able to crawl out of my shell because I knew that my opinions and ideas were respected and that there was never a wrong answer.” In addition, I regularly seek out equity and inclusion resources and request early feedback from my students to both tailor learning to student needs and to improve the accessibility of online and face-to-face instruction. Adjustments have included modifying the LMS to increase universal accessibility; adding components, like A/V discussions via Flipgrid, to increase community among online students; and developing assignments—like a digital film festival—that enable students share what they’ve learned, even during a global pandemic.

Finally, whether they be incoming freshmen focused on acclimating to college or international students seeking to improve their writing, I strive to build my students’ confidence in their abilities as thinkers and communicators. I often open classes with a short activity—such as “Trick my Sentence,” in which students expand a two-word sentence by adding clear and dynamic descriptions—so that each learner can practice skills at their own pace. I have found that these small opening activities build confidence through practice, prompting students to think imaginatively and to develop their own voices. One former engineering student of mine wrote that our in-class creative writing activities enabled her to “find new ways to solve problems in [her] math and engineering classes,” explaining further that: “We are constantly made to think a certain way and write a certain way in all of our core subjects[,] which damages our ability to find a different angle in any situation. I did not realize ... until now how important it is to continue to strengthen your creative writing skills because they can assist you in the strangest situations.” Building connections between disciplines helps students see that there is art, creativity, and critical questioning in every subject—indeed, in every human endeavor—and, I hope, works to break down some of the artificial, and often assurance-reducing, boundaries existing between fields of learning.