

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Over a decade of teaching at a small liberal arts college nested within a huge research university, I have had the chance to do many different kinds of teaching and advising. I have taught lecture-based survey courses, advanced undergraduate seminars, and graduate seminars in my home field of Russian literature; undergraduate and graduate courses in the interdepartmental Comparative Literature program; an interdisciplinary Core Colloquium for M.A. students in Regional Studies (co-taught with a social scientist and cross-listed with History and Political Science); a game-based first-year seminar, two different models of the “great books” general education course, and a critical writing course for first-year students; and Russian language classes in both traditional and intensive (summer) formats. In addition, I have served as academic adviser to first-year and sophomore students, and to Russian majors; supervised numerous B.A. and M.A. thesis projects; and served on doctoral examination and dissertation committees in Russian Literature. One of the most stimulating challenges of my career so far has been that of adapting to these widely varied roles, and developing a set of teaching strategies appropriate to a variety of audiences, while remaining true to my core pedagogical philosophy, which is that students learn best when they are asking and answering their own questions.

A student in my game-based First-Year Seminar, “Reacting to the Past,” remarked at the end of a recent semester that although she ordinarily “hated history” and found it difficult to learn, she had become a voracious seeker and consumer of historical knowledge in my class, and moreover felt confident that she would remember what she had learned, “because I had to use it every single day!” While the unconventional RTTP pedagogy would not be appropriate for most of the courses I teach, I do try to cultivate in all my students a similar degree of intellectual curiosity and active engagement with the material at hand. To this end, I make it a priority in each of my courses to foster a sense of intellectual community in the classroom, so that students feel emboldened to take intellectual risks; to bring my own enthusiasm for and curiosity about the material to every class; and to get the students thinking actively—preferably aloud—during class time, rather than passively absorbing (or worse, passively *not* absorbing) information. As a necessary corollary, I expect a great deal *from* my students, who must typically both digest large quantities of text and demonstrate their ability to think critically about it in several different ways over the course of the semester.

Over the past ten years, I have continually re-examined my pedagogical strategies in each of the various kinds of courses I teach, the better to adapt them to the specific constituencies at which each course is aimed. I have also worked to make sure my pedagogy is up-to-date and reflects current best practices in the various disciplines of foreign language pedagogy, literature and culture pedagogy, and the teaching of writing; to this end, I have participated in numerous faculty workshops and trainings, including most recently the 2.5-week STARTalk workshop for Russian language teachers at Middlebury. Throughout my career, I have looked for ways to broaden both the curriculum available to our Russian majors, and the audience for Russian literature and culture outside the major, by making connections with other departments and programs within the University: I have taught in First-Year Seminar streams sponsored by the English and History departments, in undergraduate and graduate Comparative Literature programs, and most recently in Barnard’s interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies program and

Columbia's Global Core. I am particularly proud of having pioneered the first (and so far only) Slavic Department course ("Race, Ethnicity, Narrative in the Russian/Soviet Empire") to carry Ethnic Studies credit—and the only course at the University to devote serious study to non-Russian writers on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

As a pedagogue whose original, and influential, training was as a language teacher, I have made it a priority in all my classes to lower what Stephen Krashen has called students' "affective filter," increasing their willingness to risk embarrassment for the potential rewards of pushing their own intellectual limits. I am aware that I demand a great deal of my students in this regard—I stress in-class and online participation heavily in their final grades, and subject their papers to detailed critiques—and I actively strive to make my classroom a sympathetic environment in which they feel emboldened to take such intellectual risks. In language classes, where there are clear right and wrong answers, mistakes must be corrected, but I take care to do so in a constructive manner, prompting rather than censuring, treating mistakes as puzzles the whole class can help to solve, and never interrupting an ambitious sentence in mid-flight. In literature classes, I encourage students not only to challenge one another's arguments and to marshal textual evidence in support of their own, but also to grapple messily with new ideas, helping each other develop inchoate theories and rudimentary insights into full-fledged analysis. In all my teaching, I have striven to create among my students a sense of intellectual community that not only increases their comfort level in the class, but also dignifies their efforts as contributions to a shared intellectual enterprise, rather than sterile exercises in self-justification.

Typically, I use the virtual space of the Web to help create this sense of community and jump-start class discussion; my main tool is a course blog, integrated into a course website with links to resources elsewhere on the Web, as well as to digital libraries of music and images which constitute the "multimedia" component of the class, offers several important advantages. (In some courses, I ask students to compose "front page" blog posts as one of their writing assignments; in others, I write the "front page" posts, but in all cases, students are required to join a discussion in the comments thread of the relevant post before each class.) I use the blog to contextualize each reading as richly as possible, filling in the historical and political background against which it was written as well as introducing "intertexts" in other media—music, the visual arts, architecture, and film—that immerse the students more fully in the cultural moment. In the comments section, students begin their discussion of the text, offering preliminary thoughts, questions, or readings of particular passages that caught their attention. This frees us in the classroom to engage directly in close reading and collective interpretation: I have a sense of what the students are thinking about already, which helps me to shape suitably provocative questions, and the students are equipped both with sufficient context to offer informed (if provisional) answers, and with some pre-tested ideas of their own that they bring to the table. As in all my courses, I try to begin each session with students' voices, asking a provocative question and collecting answers from several students before pressing them to analyze their initial responses in greater depth and bring the insights thus generated to bear on key passages from the text as we move toward a collective interpretation.

This approach offers several important advantages. It allows me to forego lecturing by providing an alternative way to deliver contextual information about each reading (and, in a course where the reading load is heavy, to cover topics we simply cannot fit into class time); it serves as a

unified archive of this information and of the musical and visual “intertexts” to which students are exposed in class; it strongly motivates students to complete the reading before each class (since they must post comments to the online discussion, for credit); it fosters a sense of community in the classroom, since students get to read and respond directly to one another’s comments on the blog, and they thus get to know one another by name as *thinkers* as well as social peers; and it enables me to build the in-class discussion around topics of particular interest to students, using their own observations as a point of departure; by asking students to apply more analytical pressure to their own insights, I have found it possible to guide them through a process of literary interpretation that is both contextually informed and critically sophisticated. The online postings also give me a way to invite less outspoken students into the conversation (“George made an interesting point about this on the blog. George, could you summarize for us what you posted about Olesha’s use of optical imagery?”); on evaluations, students report that it is “empowering” to hear their online comments cited in class. Finally, the online posting regime provides continual writing practice (by the end of the semester, each student generates the equivalent of 12-15 pages of writing in comment form) in an environment that is both supportive and collaborative, and less formal than a conventional paper assignment. I have found that students writing in this medium, knowing that their audience includes their peers as well as me, and that they are not constrained by the conventions of the academic essay, often produce writing that compares favorably in its cogency and thoughtfulness to what I generally see in traditional papers.

Naturally, not all feedback from students is positive, and not all feedback—positive or negative—translates easily into action. Invariably, there are students who wish I would talk more and students who wish I would talk less. A small but significant minority of students is made uncomfortable by the impression that I have no “correct” reading of the text to impose and that there is therefore no clearly articulated set of conclusions to be memorized and regurgitated on the final exam. Some of these students are energized by the idea that their ideas “count” as much as mine, but nervous that they have no guaranteed path to an “A.” Sometimes these students “come around” over the course of the semester and produce brilliant insights in their papers or on the final exam—insights which I am positive they would not have generated had I spoon-fed them information about the texts. Other students remain unsettled, and for their sake I continue to ponder and refine strategies for making my classes accessible to a wide range of learning styles.

Above all, I believe that language and literature classes share the potential to open students’ minds to foreign cultures and ideas, while simultaneously giving them a vantage point from which to reflect on their own. In the process, they may discover familiar concepts in what at first appeared foreign, and vice versa. These paired skills—of discerning universality on the one hand, and particularity on the other—are, I believe, among the most important habits of mind we can impart to our students. They also hold the key to the future of our field. I am deeply committed to attracting students to Russian language and literature, not only by demystifying them through comparative course offerings and an accessible, collegial teaching approach, but also by bringing to life the thrill of the unfamiliar, and the unpredictable intellectual rewards to be gained from immersing oneself in a foreign culture.