

Kari L. Daly
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

Dylan wasn't coming to class. He also hadn't turned in any of the scaffolding assignments for the project we were working on. I was teaching a First-Year Writing course and I know these required courses often take a back seat to other work, but this was odd -- Dylan was a strong participant in class and had written a good essay for the first assignment. I sent an email to him make sure everything was okay. When he replied, he admitted that he was having personal problems that were getting in the way of his schoolwork. *Why didn't this guy ask for an extension?*, I thought.

Dylan didn't ask for an extension because he didn't know he had that option. I told him that there was still time to catch up and set up a private meeting with him. He started coming to class again. He continued on the plan we had worked out and quickly got his feet back under him, finishing the rest of the assignments on time and earning a good grade with his hard work.

Dylan's struggles reminded me of my own. As an undergraduate, I had no idea that one could ask for extensions, that one could negotiate with one's instructors. This was part of some secret code -- what some might call the "hidden curriculum" -- which I hadn't been taught. After that semester I started putting a clause in my syllabus alerting students that they can ask for extensions and I considered what else I could do to make my courses more equitable.

I've come to believe that one of the keys to fostering student success lies in transparency, not just in the syllabus (as in Dylan's case), but in how one designs courses and conducts classes as well. For example, when I was assigned to teach *American Literature to 1880*, I struggled with what to include for readings: canonical readings by Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau? Or more works by writers of color and women? I decided to be transparent with my students about negotiating questions like these and designed the course around interrogating the canon of nineteenth century literature. We discussed the idea of canonicity and the limitations of teaching certain texts, such as page count and content, when choosing what should go into an American Literature syllabus. We then spent the semester analyzing canonical works by authors from various backgrounds utilizing contemporaneous and modern contexts -- historical events, original and subsequent receptions, book jacket designs, movie adaptations -- to help us assess the value of these works. At the end of the semester, we made a list of what should be kept and what could be left out of a syllabus like ours. Being transparent about why we make the decisions we do as instructors empowers students take control of their educational experiences. By the end of the semester, my students were not only familiar with many nineteenth-century texts, but demonstrated confidence in their ability to assess this literature.

Another key element in fostering student success lies in practicing flexibility in the use of class time. As James Lang notes in *Small Teaching* (2016), experiencing enthusiasm in class is one of the ways through which students develop a self-transcendent sense of

purpose (174). Often, fostering enthusiasm dictates allowing students to take the lead in deciding how class time is used. This strategy proved particularly helpful when I was teaching *Introduction to Drama* and a student presented on David Mamet's *Oleanna*. She contextualized the history of the play's inception (showing clips from the Anita Hill hearings) and then provided her own experience of seeing a local production of the play. Her presentation sparked a lively conversation in which students parsed out the nuances of sexual harassment and the politics of producing a play that seemed so troublesome. What should have been a 15 minute presentation ended up absorbing our entire class time as students used the controversy surrounding *Oleanna* to assess the message behind Mamet's work in a post-#metoo society. I had other items on the agenda that day -- other texts for us to discuss, an introduction to the next play we would be reading -- but I recognized that my students were making important connections between the text and real life here so I took a step back. The presentation on *Oleanna* clearly spoke to my students; even though it was part of an independent project and not on the syllabus as a class reading, many chose to write about in their final exams.

Practicing flexibility -- in use of class time, in designing courses and assignments -- actively encourages learning. Along these lines, as instructors we cannot pretend that the walls of the classroom are impermeable to outside forces; what happens to students outside these walls influences their learning experiences. My research lies in autodidacticism, that learning which takes place outside of traditional institutions. I'm interested in the cross-disciplinary thinking that self-learning can foster and in the ways our society authenticates such knowledge. To that end, incorporating a broader definition of knowledge to include that which is garnered away from the classroom informs my pedagogical approach. Recognizing experiential knowledge is especially important for humanities instructors, those who teach courses whose value may initially seem difficult for undergraduates to discern. When teaching general education courses like First-Year writing or an entry-level literature course, it's often difficult to get students to buy in. To encourage investment in the course, I give them space to demonstrate their autodidactic knowledge -- from books, from social media and internet message boards, from their jobs outside of school. Acknowledging these insights plays a role in concretizing the work we're doing: by valuing their knowledge and experiences, I both authenticate the knowledge accrued from these experiences and give students an opportunity to find something in my course that speaks to them.

My pedagogy continually develops as I work to incorporate transparency and flexibility into my teaching. Once concerned about rigor (that polarizing word) and grade inflation, I've now come to believe that student success is not achieved through tough love, but in providing an equitable learning environment. To this end, I've begun including more multimodal assignments and exploring contract grading, easing draconian penalties for late work, and leaving more blank spaces on my syllabus for students to help fill out. I've attempted to eliminate any need to know a secret code to do well in my courses. Doing so not only helps out students like Dylan, whose lives sometimes overlap with their study, but fosters more effective learning for everyone.