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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

As a child of working-class parents, I am keenly aware of how events occurring outside the classroom can influence a student's learning experience. My own undergraduate experience was marked by the struggle to balance responsibilities at home and work while navigating the college system on my own. I had no idea that one could ask for extensions and what an advisor's role was supposed to be. This was part of some secret code -- what some might call the "hidden curriculum" -- that I hadn't been taught and so I assumed I was on my own. My goal as an instructor has always been to do my best to prevent my students from feeling the sense of isolation I did by empowering them to take control of their education.

I've come to believe that one of the keys to fostering student success lies in engendering a sense of agency. This is especially true of students from marginalized populations, who often feel as if they have little to no control over their circumstances. To this end, I lay the groundwork for their agency in my course design by creating a clear and accessible syllabus and course schedule. I offer readings and assignments in a variety of modalities (alpha-numeric, videos, podcasts, etc.) and leave blank spaces on my syllabus for students to help fill in. I'm also careful to explain to my students which skills each assignment is meant to foster and how our class activities feed into larger assignments. Understanding the reasoning behind course decisions lowers students' stress, I've found, and empowers them to take control of the course by making suggestions for alterations that suit their particular class ecology. Beginning each class with a brief "check in" allows me to keep a finger on the pulse of their lives outside of my classroom as well -- which courses they're struggling with, which social events they are involved in. Armed with this knowledge, I am able to adjust our class accordingly. For example, when my students were struggling with midterms examinations one semester, we discussed our schedule as a class and decided to shift a due date on a major assignment to after spring break. This not only helped students produce better projects, but also lowered their stress considerably by giving them breathing room and, just as importantly, granting them agency.

For the first-year writing courses I teach, agency comes in the form of the grading contract that I utilize. Focusing on class engagement, rather than an arbitrary standard of what constitutes "good" writing, this grading contract allows students to take risks with their projects without fear of failing and to write in their own Englishes. It also allows them to decide how they want their work to be assessed -- halfway through the semester I set aside a class meeting for us to renegotiate the terms of this contract in order to come up with a model that feels more equitable for the particular students in the room. Such an approach recognizes that students come to college with differing educational experiences and promotes inclusion of those who may normally feel left out. Conversations with students at the end of the term suggests that the grading contract (and its renegotiation) plays a large role in them taking ownership of the class and remaining engaged. As one student explained in their evaluation of one of my classes, such an approach succeeds in "getting everyone to really think and go past their usual writing boundaries."

On a day-to-day basis, I often let my students take the lead 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. Recognizing that my students were making important connections between the text and real life, I took a step back. What should have been a fifteen-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. 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 it in their final exams. As this example demonstrates, empowering students to take control of their education leads to opportunities for them to develop a kind of "critical and deep learning" that the new *Global Challenges and Social Justice* curriculum at Union College promotes.

By being transparent in my course design and allowing students to control their assessment and class time, I empower my students to helm their educational experiences. Such an approach takes students' holistic college experience – what is happening both within and without the classroom -- into account. It also enables me to teach a course that is challenging without being unnecessarily stressful. I hope that students leave my class not just with the skills the course imparts, but with an understanding of how these are inextricably intertwined with their "real" lives and that, in one space on campus at least, they don't feel isolated and helpless. Doing so not only helps students whose struggles we are aware of, but fosters more effective learning for everyone.