

Teaching Philosophy: Spencer Todd Bennington

The first classroom I ever taught in didn't have desks, a whiteboard to write on, or a projector for PowerPoint presentations. My first classrooms were dusty gym mats on the hardwood floors of community centers and church basements. Because, before I ever taught college writing, I taught Tae Kwon Do. Not just a system of flashy acrobatics or an activity to keep children busy after school, Tae Kwon Do is an art of *becoming*--a philosophy of life-long, critical self-reflection informed by a deep, bodily sense of praxis. My research of embodied rhetorics led me to understand this process as what Hawhee (2004) calls *phusiopoiesis*, the ancient Greek pedagogical belief that students can be shaped or molded--that they can transform. I see this transformation everyday in my martial arts students, and, as a result, I strive to facilitate that same growth in my writing classrooms by teaching mindfulness techniques, designing experiential learning opportunities, and encouraging a critically reflexive mindset.

Mindfulness of the Body, Mindfulness of the Self

Despite having designed multiple curricula and written my fair share of student learning outcomes, I don't see higher education as something with finite objectives or end goals. Instead, I teach students to embrace a continuous improvement model of learning, one underpinned by mindfulness techniques designed to foster habitual reflection and engender critical reflexivity. I start this training on the first day of class by introducing the concept of arrival/departure exercises, something I make a part of every class. The arrival exercise is simply one minute of meditative silence designed to help students transition from whatever class or job they're coming from, whatever stress they may have been shouldering, and into a state of mind conducive to learning. To achieve this, I always ask students *not* to try to clear their mind, but, instead, to focus intensely on the last aspect of our class that they can remember. This could be a concept, an activity, a question they meant to ask--as long as it's rooted in our work. Focusing in such a way makes it much more difficult for their minds to wander and helps position them more firmly in the present space of the writing classroom. Similarly, departure exercises usually work as a type of "sprint review" for the content covered in that class period. It's an opportunity for students to share something they learned, ask questions, or give feedback on exercises they found problematic or especially helpful. These mindfulness techniques, and others like them, help transform the classroom space into a contemplative place, one where students can take a moment to consider their whole body as it fits into their educational experience, and how that experience is just one component of their larger, more complex life.

More Than Brains Wired to Laptops

I understand my students to be human beings, ones who each represent a different set of needs when it comes to experiential learning. This understanding helps me design pedagogical opportunities which allow for students to engage with course content on multiple levels. For example, in my professional writing class, one of my favorite activities involves students creating

a set of directions to help a differently-abled user navigate campus. The class ends with me taking on the role of the user and letting my students follow behind me as I try to get from point A to point B. Not only does this engage their bodies in a different way than listening to a lecture, but it offers physical applications for theoretical discussions involving usability, accessibility and ethics in technical communication (especially if they have to write the instructions while I'm teaching on crutches!) The same can be said of other activities like role-playing to demonstrate solutions to common issues when working with a team or even mini-presentations students give to help teach a concept to their peers. To facilitate this kind of experiential learning, I make sure that my students are moving around, talking to each other, writing on the board, or completing some kind of visual or haptic based task at least once per class and never sitting to listen to a lecture for longer than twenty minutes.

Toward Critically Reflexive Teaching and Learning

It's the combination of these more active, experiential learning exercises and mindfulness techniques, however, that allow for students to move away from simple guided reflection tasks toward developing habits of critical reflexivity. To encourage this transition throughout the course of the semester, I provide students with a heuristic featuring eight intrapersonal skills to track as we move through our assignments. These include invention, enthusiasm, curiosity, confidence, non-action, adaptability, persistence, and receptiveness. So, for example, if a student felt uncomfortable completing the instruction/navigation activity described above, they can reflect on and write about how components of that activity may have made them feel less than *confident* or perhaps *unenthusiastic*. Over time and with practice, instead of simply reflecting, students develop strategies for iteration by isolating what intimidated or challenged them and using that knowledge to become more *adaptable* or *persistent* in the future. Employing a fixed heuristic that allows for students to continuously examine their own embodied learning experience in specific terms trains the kind of habitual critical reflexivity necessary for transformation.

Just as this heuristic for critical reflexivity helps my students construct their own natures, to transform into the educated, working professionals they want to become, it helps me constantly evolve as an instructor. Not only do I use reflexive student writing to help me improve my classroom activities and assignments, I also reflect on these eight intrapersonal skills to challenge myself as a teacher. When analyzing my lesson plans I'll often question whether or not the material will inspire multiple forms of *invention* or pique my students' *curiosity* in different ways. Additionally, I consult these eight principles when evaluating my own classroom performance by asking if I resisted the energy of my students too much, if I need to perform more *non-action* or become more *receptive*. I do this because, ultimately, I believe *phusiopoiesis* to be a process best modeled for students, one that they can eventually accept as an attitude to adopt instead of simply a series of tasks to complete for a grade. It's my hope that if I'm transparent about my own desires to improve and change, that my students will transfer what they've seen and practiced in my class to their future learning and working environments, that they will never become complacent, and that they will keep striving to *become*.

