**Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

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Heu•ris•tic (adjective )

1. Serving to indicate or point out; stimulating interest as a means of furthering investigation.

2. Encouraging a person to learn, discover, understand, or solve problems on his or her own, as by experimenting, evaluating possible answers or solutions, or by trial and error: a heuristic teaching method.

3. Of, relating to, or based on experimentation, evaluation, or trial-and-error methods.

**Introduction**

Mine is primarily a heuristic pedagogy. I believe it is far more helpful in the long run to show students a door that they can walk through to build their own understanding than it is to talk at length about a door. My enduring hope is that the ideas and techniques that I present in class will make them curious to know more or help them identify solutions; because a student can memorize content in the short term but when they are actively engaged with ideas they stand a much better chance of retaining the conceptual information and utilizing it in the future. I find that every class requires its own set of rules to communicate ideas and techniques to students, however, I feel like I have developed some core beliefs about teaching that apply broadly to my work as an educator as a whole. These beliefs are that it is my responsibility to exposestudents to multiple techniques so that they can select the ones that work best for them, that everyone possesses within them the capacity to act, that it is important to create a safe environment for growth and learning, that students must be given room for “failure” when learning new things, that content learned in classes should be geared towards future professional use, that students will learn more when classes are more conversational, that class discussions should build on readings not repeat them, that professors must routinely evaluate their pedagogies and update their techniques, that professors should give students the tools they need to succeed in their classes (which might include teaching things we think they should already know), and finally I believe I should be clear about my expectations at the beginning of the semester as well as give students the room to be clear about theirs. What follows is an explanation of these beliefs as well as some of the ways I try to incorporate heuristic teaching into my classrooms.

**Give students multiple tools to create their own individual tool kit**. In graduate school and on my own I have learned a number of analytic techniques for breaking down dramatic texts. It was not particularly surprising that not every technique I learned opened the text significantly for me; what I did find that I had not anticipated was that some of the techniques I found to be tedious were powerful tools for other directors. This told me that there is not one single technique by which artists grow, and therefore students should learn and apply a wide variety of techniques in order to identify which ones will serve their art the most effectively. One way I utilize this approach is in my Directing I class: in the first half of the semester students work together on a single text and learn 12 different analytic techniques, mostly from Francis Hodge’s book Play Directing, that they apply to that text. In the second half of the semester, each student selects a different show to work on and with which they learn 9 new analytic techniques from William Ball’s book A Sense of Direction. For their final analysis of this project students submit all the analysis they learned in the second half of the semester, but I also ask them to select two pieces of analysis that they did for the first project with the instruction to choose the techniques that they found opened the text up the most for them and apply these to the second play. With this they begin to build the toolkit of analytic techniques that work best for them.

**Everyone possesses within them the capacity to act**. I do not feel like this is a wildly optimistic statement because acting is something that every one of us has done in the past. The creative play that virtually all children engage in is not at all different from how the great acting teacher Sanford Meisner defined acting: “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.” Children do not forget their real names or where they are in reality when they imagine they are Batman or Wonder Woman, but they do allow themselves to live through the imagined circumstances as if they were real and important anyway. Because everyone, regardless of major, focus, or interest comes to theater classes with this background, I feel like everyone can act if they decide to tap into this interest. Of course I believe in the importance of training and technique, but I think it is important to always remind people that they already possess the capacity, that they do not need to wait for years of training to start performing authentically **now**. They merely have to decide to tap into something they have always known how to do and then (and this is crucial) let people watch.

**Learning new things can be scary and as such it is important to create a safe environment for growth**. As much as students are used to being graded and evaluated on their work, I think it is important to realize that messing up while learning something new can create a sense of shame that can cause a student to close themselves off to growth. I do not mean to suggest that students need to be treated with kid gloves, but I do think basic respect when communicating errors can change whether a student hears and internalizes comments. I feel like Severus Snape from the Harry Potter book series is a great example of someone who does this completely wrong: he insults students and sneers at their efforts. Clearly the fictional character is gifted in his field, but he is abysmal at considering the human aspect of his students. I think great teachers can point out errors in a way that makes it clear what the next step should be and, further, makes students excited to try again. I have been lucky enough to have such teachers in my past and strive to emulate this ability they have whenever I am offering criticisms and corrections to students. And the need to create a safe space doesn’t end with how the educator in the room talks to students; it is just important for peers to treat one another with respect and (ideally) kindness and support in order for someone to take the risk to leap into new learning.

**Room for failure**. Building on the last point, I tell students on the first day of classes that I expect them to fail. Not fail the class, obviously, but as I believe it impossible to take risks and learn new things without messing up, it hardly seems fair to penalize students for any missteps that occur on their way to proficiency. Children do not walk all at once, it is a painstaking process that takes anywhere from 9 to 16 months and involves an awful lot of falling down (I remind them). It is my hope that I can help students move away from this popular, corrosive notion that failure in the moment is indicative of one’s overall worth as a human being. As such I build several steps into the learning process so that students can learn a given technique without fear of (capital F) Failure. One example of how I do this can be seen in my Text Analysis class: each analytic technique students learn starts with a chapter from David Ball’s book Backwards & Forwards. They read the chapter, then we discuss the technique in class. After discussing the technique, we choose a scene from the play we are reading and – as a class, writing on the board – we apply that technique to the section of the text. They are then instructed to go home and apply that technique to the rest of the selected play and bring this completed analysis to class where we then review it together. Inevitably, most students realize errors (some large, some small) in their homework as we go over it together. This round of analysis I grade only to see that they have done the work. It is the next and final round – the one where they revise their analysis based on this fifth look at a given technique – that I grade for content. I have structured the class this way because I think there are certain errors that students cannot see until they have practically applied techniques to text, and I want them to be able to mess up safely on their way to mastering the skills.

**Content covered in classes should be geared towards future use**. It has been my experience that students are more open to content if I can explain how the work we are doing is something that will help them work as a theater professional after graduation. As such I make an effort to connect each lesson we do to industry application. One example of how I do this can be seen in the connective conversations I have with the Basic Acting class I have taught as part of the Gen Ed Humanities curriculum for non-theater majors planning non-theater based careers after graduation. In this class the primary focus is, of course, on basic techniques to help people who have little to no experience on stage learn to connect to character and successfully perform a variety of roles. However, each lesson in the semester comes with a conversation about ways that particular skill can be useful in non-theatrical careers. Once a student has worked on comfortably saying their lines with clear diction and strong volume in front of the class, it is easy to talk about the benefit of being comfortable with public speaking. The same is true for creative improvisational thinking, awareness of body in terms of physical communication, working with a group, using different tactics to solve a problem, etc.

**Making classes conversations not lectures**. I believe students learn more deeply when they are a part of the conversation rather than just being spoken to. I tell students that theater is a collaborative art form, and as such, even those who might be naturally quiet need to get used to participating in discussions. One way I encourage this is to rearrange the seating to be circular whenever the class is small enough. Another way I do this is tied to my next belief: **Class content should build on readings not repeat them**. One way I incorporate both of these beliefs into my work as a teacher can be seen in the Comprehension Sheet assignments students are given in the Theater History & Literature classes I teach. To help students learn more about reading for comprehension and note-taking, I give them a handout for each textbook reading they do in Theater History & Literature I and II; this sheet is full of questions that the chapter answers as well as lists of names of important people, texts, and terminology from the era being studied. I let students use these highly detailed sheets when taking the quizzes on the chapters, and then ask them to use what they have written down a base as they start taking notes in the classroom conversations. This not only has them actively connecting with the material three times (as they read it, as they write it down, and as they look for the correct answers while taking their quizzes), but it gives them something they can use as we continue with the conversation in class. If the lesson plan calls for us to discuss French Neoclassical Theater, for example, rather than stating “the rules of the neoclassical ideal are…” I ask for volunteers to list these rules because they have them written down in their notes on the chapter. Students walk into the conversation armed with their own opinions of the reading – what intrigues them, what confuses them, what do they want to know more about, what appalls them – both because of the reading for comprehension they have already engaged in and because these sheets always ask at them to think about their reactions to the chapter at the end – the full class can engage with the content, agree on terminology, and move forward into areas the textbook did not cover.

**The way I learned is not necessarily the best way to teach the students of today**. In his TED Talk “Use Data to Build Better Schools” Andreas Schliecher said:  
  
 “In PISA [Program for International Student Assessment] we are less interested in looking at

whether students can reproduce what they’ve learned, and more interested in whether they can extrapolate from what they know and creatively use their knowledge in novel situations. Because that’s what the modern world really rewards people for doing. The modern world no longer rewards you just for what you know. Now Google knows everything. The modern world rewards people to think outside of the box. To use technologies that have not been invented yet to solve social problems we don’t know about yet.”

When I was an undergrad, theater history meant memorizing dates and names. When I first taught theater history at my first job after graduate school I did the same thing and asked students to memorize many details. But after a few years of teaching this class (and after seeing smart, hard-working students struggle) I asked myself why I wanted them to memorize these specifics. If was being honest with myself, if I hadn’t recently taught a class I would most likely need look the dates up myself to be sure. With a vast database of knowledge at everyone’s fingertips, I needed to think about how the study of theater history was directly germane to a career in the arts and tailor my curriculum to suit those needs, not the ones of the late 80s/early 90s. I think it is important that professors must routinely evaluate their pedagogies and update their techniques.

**Give students the skills they need to succeed in your class**. I do not just mean giving students the class content that is covered over the course of the semester (that is the primary goal of course), but I believe it is important to make sure students are equipped with the skills needed to execute the course content. Some students leave high school knowing things like how to take notes in class, how to read for comprehension, how to write a paper for an academic class, how to budget the time needed to complete an assignment, etc. and some do not. I believe it is important to make room in class to explain these things, or to set aside office hours to aid in this kind of learning, as well as to let students know what kinds of academic resources exist to help as well. I am always willing to help any student who will work hard, regardless of the skill level they walk into my classroom with.

**Be clear about your expectations up front (and give them room to be clear about theirs)**. On the first day of every class of the semester, as we finish reviewing the syllabus I have a section for set aside to discuss expectations; mine and theirs. I ask students to take a minute to think about and write down (there’s a blank space for this in the second to last page in the syllabus) what their expectations are for the class and for me as a professor. Often students write about wanting to understand the topics covered better or hoping to get comfortable taking risks, but sometimes a student will talk about something more specific – for example: explaining how they learn and expressing a hope that I will address content in enough ways that their learning skills will be taken into account. I feel it is important to not to just tell them what my expectations are without asking what theirs are as well, as I want them to feel they have ownership in the work we are about to embark upon together. When I share my expectations with them they are usually something like this from my Text Analysis syllabus:

As a student I expect that you will:

* **Read the plays**
* **Direct your attention in class to the content**
* **Participate in the group discussion**
* **Retain information covered in class**
* **Do your own analysis**
* **Come to see me if you are having difficulties**
* **Treat this room as an institution of higher learning**
  + Not a restaurant (please don’t eat)
  + Not a living room (please don’t sleep)
* **Work very hard**
* **Come to class except for in emergencies** 
  + Tech week and hangovers do not constitute emergencies
* **Be prepared**
* **Mess up and Fail**
* **Show respect**
  + To me
  + To one another
  + To the ideas, plays, personalities discussed
  + To the degree you are working towards
  + To the field you hope to enter
* **Strive for excellence**
* **Have fun**

I want them to know these basic things: that you can’t analyze a text if you don’t read it, and when someone is speaking you should do them the courtesy of looking at them not the floor and not your phone. I want them to know why I expect them to do their own analysis (because when you divide the work, you are not coming up with your own thoughts), and that failure is a part of the process (as stated earlier here). Finally I want them to know that I expect them to strive for excellence because I believe students will work harder when you state your belief in their ability to do so; and I expect them to have fun because I just don’t see the point of work if it is not enjoyable.

**Conclusion**

I believe firmly in the importance of educating students in the theater arts.

For students who are not theater majors but come to a drama department seeking a humanities credit (or secretly hoping that one day they will be the next Denzel Washington or Natalie Portman), learning theater arts teaches comfort with public speaking, trains right brain activities like creativity and improvisation, encourages collaboration and impresses upon these young minds the powerful event that can occur when creating and watching theatrical works.

For students who intend to pursue a career in theater – as in any discipline – there is a clear set of skills and techniques that must be mastered before heading into the professional world. I think there can be a misguided sense that because much of the work of the theater artist comes from their own imagination that there is no real pedagogy involved. Nothing could be further from the truth, theater is hard work, and learning the methods that support innate talent, that hone creativity, are absolutely crucial to the future success of the would-be artist. I remain committed to serving this learning and eagerly await every opportunity to point out the many doors that students can walk through to find the knowledge they seek.