

Michael J. Beilfuss  
Teaching Philosophy

Through literature and writing instruction, I attempt to convey to my students the critical and analytical skills necessary to live an engaged and fulfilling life. I try to instill a desire to engage in self-reflection by encouraging students to question themselves and the world around them. I stress the process of interpreting literature and analyzing rhetoric as a means to develop intellectual abilities that extend beyond the English classroom. The classroom should be a place where students feel safe to express themselves and engage with the material under review. It should also be a place where new ideas challenge students; a place that welcomes moments of occasional discomfort, those mental growing pains that occur when new ways of thinking about the world are developed. These moments can occur at any time, from a student's attempt to construct a rhetorical analysis of a scholarly article, to presenting arguments in a mock court case based on a work of literature, to reading a poem out loud – all activities that regularly occur in my classroom. While I embrace a student-centered approach, I also provide lectures on the content, context, form, methods, and diverse interpretations of texts. It is during these lectures, which typically comprise about one-third of my time in the classroom, where I can draw on my own research as well as a broad base of knowledge of literature and rhetoric, authors, time periods, and literary and cultural movements.

Part of my teaching philosophy may be expressed through an experience I had teaching an Eco-Composition course I designed. The course focused on a variety of methods of understanding and writing about human relationships with the environment, from narratives of place attachment to examinations of political and geographic borders. The class had a diverse student population which allowed for lively debates about environmental issues and the rhetoric employed in communicating those issues. With the diverse student population, I quickly discovered that the class was split between groups of students who were unreceptive to the topic, a smaller group of students who were more or less supportive of environmental issues, and a majority who were either indifferent or somewhere in the middle. I always try to be responsive to the particularity of individual classrooms and the student population as a whole. In this case, I shifted attention from the environmental issues and challenged my students to question the writers', and their own, assumptions, values, and beliefs.

In one specific lesson, I asked them to examine the rhetorical context and strategies Michael Pollan employs when discussing large corporations in his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. They provided a detailed explanation of their understanding of Pollan's position and approach, and explained their own points of agreement or contention. I then asked them to visit the same companies' websites to examine the rhetorical strategies engaged by the corporations. Finally the students wrote brief comparisons between the different approaches, how they were employed by the authors, and what effects they had on their audience. The written work they produced in response to this prompt made it clear that they walked away with a better sense of how to "read" the world and interpret the rhetoric that confronts them daily. I noticed a marked improvement in subsequent assignments and class discussions that suggests they began to internalize the analytical and critical skills they used for this assignment.

Besides what I have learned from my experiences teaching, I have received training in writing instruction from numerous sources: the Writing Programs Office at Texas A&M University, composition workshops and classes at SUNY New Paltz, and as I worked toward fulfilling the requirements for New York State teacher certification in English/Secondary Education. At Oklahoma State University, I am continuing to advance my knowledge and skills by participating in bi-weekly meetings with the director of the Technical Writing program and other instructors and professors. I am also currently attending a workshop on Critical Thinking under the aegis of the Provost's Initiative: Focus on General Education. I try to remain actively involved in meetings, workshops, and training sessions in order to help keep my teaching fresh and lively. I am always looking for methods of reinventing my lessons and approaches to teaching.

Among the courses I have taught, American Literature 1865-Present, Introduction to Literature, and American Ethnic Literature have provided me with the experience of presenting a broad range of subjects. I have had the opportunity to design and teach writing and literature classes with specific themes, including American Character; Media Literacy; and Food, Technology, and the Environment. At OSU, I am currently teaching Introduction to Literature, a course I have taught many times, but never tire of teaching. I am also teaching Technical Writing, where I am facilitating group projects in my class. The students are creating analytical reports based on local, real-world problems they have identified and researched. I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to teach in computer classrooms several times where I have integrated the use of technology in the learning process.

As the first generation of digital natives begins to enter college, the thoughtful integration of advanced technology in the classroom has become ever more crucial. I use technology nearly every day in the classes I teach. I still believe that nothing beats personal interaction and those moments of spontaneous bursts of new and creative thought that arise during classroom discussion. Nevertheless, new technologies provide ample tools to supplement, and advance, the work that happens face to face. At OSU, I use D2L to collect and respond to assignments and to post course documents online for easy access. I have also begun to foster the use of cloud-based technology to assist in group projects. The students in my Technical Writing classes are required to use OneDrive and/or Google Docs to create and share documents as well as work (and write) collaboratively in real-time. I have successfully employed online discussion posts through Moodle and Blackboard to provide more sustained and considered interactions between students once outside of the classroom. The multimedia experience now possible through digital technologies also helps appeal to students through media with which they are accustomed. Clips from YouTube, audio files from poets.org and the Nobel Foundation website, supplemental online material provided by publishers, among other resources, provide valuable context, expand arenas for creativity, and establish connections across place and time. Whenever technology enters the classroom it can provide opportunities for growth, and I employ it in such a way that it does not become simply passive consumption of information. I encourage interaction and reflective engagement with the medium and the knowledge conveyed through that medium.

As I progress through my career, I look forward to teaching upper division undergraduate courses where I can continue to advance the interdisciplinary approach I take to teaching writing and literature. I also hope to integrate some of the interdisciplinary skills and practices I've learned and participated in at such venues as the ASLE conference and Texas A&M's Glascock Center for Humanities Research, where scholars from across the humanities regularly meet to discuss works in progress. Over the years I have continued to build upon my successes, and have learned to revise, re-plan, and improve the methods and tools I employ in the classroom. One of my strengths remains my passion for literature and writing—my students seem to respond to my classroom demeanor and often note in teacher evaluations that my passion is evident and can be contagious and motivating. Many students struggle with writing and interpreting texts, often looking for the correct answer or the correct way to write an essay. To address these questions and concerns, I utilize one-on-one student conferences to help students discover their own topics and/or arguments. While I try to help them find the answers they are looking for and develop strong communication skills, I am committed to facilitating a desire to actively engage, analyze, and think critically about their world,—the promise and hope that comes to life-long learners.