

A room filled with students, all working together in small groups, completely engrossed. They scarcely notice me as I walk through the room, making myself available for questions and listening to them passionately discuss the details and real-world application of what they are learning. As the instructor, I have become extraneous. This is my ideal classroom.

My approach to teaching is to create a space for learning to happen. I am a believer in a student-centered classroom, which takes the spotlight off the instructor and puts it onto the students by encouraging them to take charge of their own education. Please do not mistake this for an attempt to come unprepared to my classes or to get out of doing prep work. On the contrary, teaching with this goal compels me to do extra homework because I not only have to prepare the material being covered but also must devise a way of presenting it that will be both purposeful and relevant to the craft they are studying. An example of my methodology follows.

Students in my recent acting class were ready to begin their final project: performing in scenes from published plays. I did not want to randomly pair the students off and assign scenes of my choosing because that would have robbed young performers of two important experiences: first, acting in a play they were truly excited about; and second, reading a variety of playwrights and discovering whose work spoke to them personally. So I got out of the way and allowed learning to happen by utilizing an exercise called “Scene Dating,” which I developed with a fellow teacher. Each student was to select two scenes of their own choosing and pitch them to all the other students during a “speed dating” day in class. The exercise worked beautifully. With the most passionate students absorbing the less passionate ones into their scenes, everyone cared about the material they were working on. Even better was the amount of plays each student read in order to find scenes they wanted to perform. Instead of just reading the one play I assigned them, each student read between 4-6 plays during their search. In class, they were excitedly telling each other about what they had read, which led to even more reading based on the recommendations they offered each other! I know this exercise was a success, not only by the results I witnessed but also from the student evaluations, where I received upper echelon rankings that listed me as one of the most effective teachers in the department.

I apply my student-centered approach not just to large projects but everywhere I can. For example, routine reading quizzes have become an exciting and essential part of my Intro to Theatre Process class. Because it is a writing-intensive course, I turned the quizzes into weekly exercises in clear and concise writing by placing the students at the forefront of the learning experience. Each week a different student creates the quiz question from the assigned reading material. While the rest of the class is graded on their answers to the question, the quiz creator is graded by the class on how well he/she wrote the question. The students are excited by their responsibility as evaluators, taking their role very seriously, as does the question writer, whose grade is on the line. The overall effect is an

entire class applying what they have learned and animatedly debating good writing with one another every week, all the while cultivating their critical thinking skills.

This method of teaching requires imagination and planning, but I am careful not to let my preconceived ideas about what the class should be blind me to what the class is. A theater mentor of mine once said, "A director must do his homework and then not be afraid to throw it all away in the rehearsal room. This is because the play is happening onstage, not in his notebook." This statement also applies to teaching. While it is important to have a lesson plan and to be well prepared, it is equally important not to let that preparedness overshadow the spontaneous teaching moments that present themselves. Taking advantage of an opportunity to develop my students' critical thinking skills, even though that might not be on my schedule for the day, is an opportunity I do not want to miss. It is equally important not to let my lesson plans make me oblivious to how the class is reacting to an exercise. I try to remain flexible so that the needs of my students, instead of a rigid timetable, lead me to the next step of the learning process. Each class is a unique organism, and what worked with one group of students won't work with every group. Keeping this in mind has taught me the importance of always being willing to learn, even though I am the instructor.

I believe that being excited about being a student makes someone an exciting teacher. Because of this, self-examination and self-improvement are essential parts of my teaching philosophy. I inspect the student reaction to each class I teach, learning from them how to re-write lectures and re-evaluating lesson plans in order to keep them accessible and effective. I believe that it is my responsibility never to stop learning, in the classroom as well as in my directing. It is my duty to engage my students; to challenge them and ignite in them a passion for what they are studying; and to make the material as interesting as possible.

The rewards of these efforts are enormous. Seeing undecided majors become so excited about theatre that they transfer into the theatre department; watching shy wallflowers blossom by commanding my rapt attention during an acting scene; and watching students become so adrenalized about a subject that they pursue it outside of class, away from school and all on their own - all this is deeply satisfying. It's why I love teaching.