

## TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

When I first began my teaching journey here at the University of Alabama, I was quite scared to teach classrooms full of foreign teenagers. I became ever so conscious of my ethnic and cultural identity as an international student from India. So, when I started teaching EN101 in August of 2022, my teaching philosophy was about survival. However, I decided to use my personal cultural experience in my classroom, and I assigned diverse and inclusive texts like *Yarn: An Interwoven Memoir* by Pragya Bhagat, *So Now You Know: Growing Up Gay in India* by Vivek Tejuja and *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* by Trevor Noah. To my surprise, my students responded with great respect and genuine interest to my selected readings. Those readings sparked thoughtful and timely discussions about immigration, sexuality, and racial politics in the classroom and I was thoroughly impressed by the brilliant, kind, and nuanced opinions from my students on these critical and even controversial topics. I felt I was succeeding at one of my primary goals of teaching my students how to think critically.

However, as a newly anointed teacher, even after building an initial good rapport with my students, I did face my fair share of challenges: mainly how to keep the students engaged and motivated throughout the semester. To encourage more student involvement in the classroom the first thing I started doing (and continue to do – it has become a teacherly habit by now) was individual check-ins: both on a personal level and on an academic level. I make sure that we open the class with a form of icebreaker or “pass the mic session” where each of my students shares where they are emotionally at the beginning of the class. I have also figured out that checking in does not have to be the most innovative of class activities, it just needs to be genuine. I always try to truly and deeply listen to them sharing their thoughts and engage with them in meaningful and sincere conversations. Deep listening helped create a welcoming environment in my classroom where all my students felt empowered and comfortable to express themselves freely and surely. This human approach, rather than a strictly teacherly one, helped me build easy and empathetic connections with my students, which is perhaps the most important of my teaching goals.

The other form of checking in – academic – was, however, even more effective than personal check-ins. Because these check-ins highlighted the need to shift to a more process-oriented approach in teaching. These ritualistic check-ins during class time when my students are on task helped me realise that both teaching and learning happen in these moments of direct and individual interactions. Therefore, to hold the end-product (like the papers the students write for a class) of the coursework as the ultimate proof of learning is to deny the whole teaching-learning process itself. This realisation made me alter my lesson plan to include as much in-class working time as possible. And this caused a big improvement in student engagement and helped develop a healthy and free dialogue between me and my students. I believe, focusing on the process instead on the product, is at this moment – when Teaching, the vocation itself is under the threat of an AI takeover – ever so necessary.

I, now, recognise that my role as a teacher is to teach my students how to critically think first, and then how to express those thoughts in a relevant medium or form. While AI tools like ChatGPT can probably write a paper for my students in whatever form they require, hopefully, it cannot yet become a surrogate thinker for them. And so, I believe, focusing on the process of thinking and writing, rather than on the final written artefact itself, will both create better writers and better thinkers. And this is exactly what I aim to do in my classroom by promoting diverse and inclusive pedagogy, teaching with empathy, and underscoring the central importance of the Process in all my teachings.