

## Empathy: The gateway towards understanding, connection and tolerance

My Ted Talk today, “Empathy: The gateway towards understanding, connection and tolerance,” will present how my pedagogy of love, my guidelines for course behaviors and texts I select contribute to developing those three qualities in my Women’s and Gender Studies’ students, a field I will now refer to as WGS. One crucial tenant of WGS courses is to develop student empathy towards others, especially those individuals who find themselves marginalized--perhaps because they are a racial or ethnic minority, a transgendered person or someone who is gender non-conforming. Since I became the Director of WGS fall 2016, I have taught our Intro to Women’s and Gender Studies course every spring term. My other area of specialization, being a professor of French literature, culture, language and French for Business equally informs my pedagogical approach. In our special topics’ French for business course, students learn that two dimensions of cultivating a positive *corporate culture* is having a strong and caring corporate president who communicates clear core values up and down the hierarchy. This approach successfully builds team spirit, and workers are motivated to do their best because they are respected by their administration. In the context of a university classroom, similar strategies help foster a positive classroom environment. In my Intro courses, I articulate clear classroom values of how students will address each other and approach our course material. Honesty and integrity are among the core values I emphasize to my students. I allow myself to be “real”, my authentic self who is frank and direct with my students. Clarity of classroom policies allows students to *understand* who I am as a professor and a human being and how they need to comport themselves in class.

When going over the syllabus, I talk candidly to my students about my pedagogy of love, an approach to teaching that came into being after the massacre at Virginia Tech. I articulate that I love my students, and that once they are my students they will always be my students. My pedagogy of love also means that I am greatly invested in their success as individuals and in the quality of their work.

My policy of excused absences contributes to establishing clear core values as well. Students learn that I do not ask for a doctor's note to verify that their absence is legitimate because I trust them. Their word suffices so personal integrity is crucial to maintain. I also give them two grace absences where there is no penalty for them not being in class. Yet with rights come responsibilities. If homework is due, I expect it is turned in on time. I also expect that they be ready for class the next time we meet. I understand that life happens, that they might need to miss my class to write a paper that counts 50% of their final grade. That breaking up with a loved one interferes with their studies. That policy exists so students never feel they have to lie to me if they miss class—it is a way for them not to lose their personal and academic integrity. Over three decades of higher education teaching, shared values are solidified by *explaining* the reasoning behind my academic policies and personal ethics. Over three decades of teaching, students have expressed amazement as well as gratitude in the trust and faith I place in them. Understanding that life happens is a way of showing empathy—an ability to grasp what they are going through in their lives.

Student motivation is greater when students witness my investment in their academic work, such as writing substantive comments on their papers. On their less formal commentaries, I show understanding and care when they relate their personal stories of pain or mishaps. Our

class deals with many personal and social issues that resonate with students. Hence, they have confided in me that they have been bullied or have had others tell them that they are not “man” or “woman” enough according to society’s traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, or that they are struggling or have struggled with eating disorders. Acknowledging and showing empathy for their lived experiences, contributes to building a strong rapport between my students and me. My pedagogical policies and strategies nurture deeper professor-student relationships, greater trust and more meaningful exchanges.

The readings in my Intro to WGS course equally nurture empathy as well as tolerance in my students: they develop students’ ability to listen to divergent views and sensitive topics respectfully and to hear others’ stories with a non-judgmental mind. Their first readings establish guidelines for how to express their views in class. I will discuss two concepts that shape my students’ general classroom behavior and contribute to our classroom culture of empathy. I am deeply indebted to my WGS colleague Dr. Christine Labusky for sharing having shared these documents with me. Christine, a nurse practitioner before becoming a university professor, applied the concept of universal precautions from the medical field to the context of the classroom. In health care, Universal Precautions refers to how a health care provider wears gloves with every patient they come in contact with, and not just the ones that look like they might be contagious. In the classroom, this means we discuss topics as inclusively as possible. I impress on students that we should speak of a topic—such as gender non-binary people, abortion or asexuality—*as if anyone* in the room might identify with the subject matter or identity we are discussing. We therefore want to be considerate and phrase our ideas kindly so as not to insult or cause harm to someone who holds that view. Students take this to heart.

Along the same vein, there are 24 bulleted points that review with students how to listen to their fellow classmates and voice their opinions. This creates a safer classroom for students to hear about new concepts with less nervousness or anxiety. My guidelines sheet, offers many suggestions to encourage a safer classroom for all. Six of these guidelines follow:

1. **RESPECT** others' rights to hold opinions and beliefs that differ from your own. For me, this sets the stage for differing views to be expressed and the right of any student to hold such views, provided that they are expressed kindly.
2. Challenge and/or criticize **IDEAS** rather than people—this practice in class allows us to examine where views or prejudices might originate without anyone in the class feeling picked upon or singled out.
3. When applicable, support your statements with **EVIDENCE (facts)**. While opinions and beliefs do form our worldview, they are not facts and do not carry the same weight in a class discussion as ideas supported by scholarship and academic studies.
4. **BE OPEN** to changing your mind and make room for others to do the same. Consider the possibility of **UNLEARNING** things that you once believed to be true. I let them know that this can be a frightening process, indeed. Many times throughout the semester, students have the realization that a belief they held seemed a like a “universal truth” was in fact a social or cultural norm, learned perhaps at home, at school, at one’s religious institution if one is not an atheist, etc. Their commentaries and end-of-the-year evaluations often mention how their thinking has changed regarding certain issues or identities and how grateful they are for having taken Intro to WGS

5. **REMEMBER** that everyone in class is still learning. **TRUST** that everyone is doing the best they can and be **GENEROUS** with your assumptions about them. Along the same lines, 6. do not blame each other for the misinformation we have all learned, or for the gaps in our knowledge.

I am a firm believer that the best conversationalists are in fact, the best *listeners*, hence I encourage my students to listen carefully to their classmates, calling them by name, and referring back to the idea they expressed before adding an additional point to the discussion. I want them to be aware of different communication styles. We can express our ideas differently based on our backgrounds, culture of origin, and/or current contexts. The last component I will share that establishes a shared set of core values in class is to keep comments in the first person singular—such as “I think”, “I believe” or “I read that”. The end goal for putting into place these guidelines to make everyone in class feel included and that they matter as a human being. I am therefore able to conduct discussions all semester long on highly delicate or politically thorny issues with a framework of respect, connection and tolerance.

My last point is how many assigned texts encourage empathy is my Intro course. One way to foster understanding for marginalized groups is to assign readings they have authored. For example, when discussing Trans Studies, Transgendered rights and people, students read articles authored by transgendered people—here I thank Dr. Maggie Nanney who exposed me to the articles I assign for this topic. When reading Jacob Hale and al.’s text “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing. . .” my students concluded that transgendered people have encountered much rudeness and uncivility, which they inferred by the basic nature of the rules

and the tone of some of the guidelines. One rule that Hale presented was to “approach [Trans Studies and Trans individuals] with a sense of humility.” That suggestion resonated with my students and made them think of our guidelines for class—treating others with respect. In a different article, “Telling Trans Stories Beyond Born in the Wrong Body,” my students learned other narratives of how transgendered people view and accept themselves and their bodies. They enjoyed the casual, but poignant conversation among four transgendered people. Tiq Milan, a trans man with gender affirming surgeries stated: “The idea that being born in the wrong body seems to be the most commonly used and most simplistic way of explaining the transgendered experience, but it never really fit my narrative. I never felt I was born in the wrong body, I just evolved away from it.” Nico Fonseca, a “gender variant queer fat femme,” related that he felt a lot of pressure to abandon the parts of himself that were feminine in order to be masculine in an acceptable way. Lastly, Jacob Tobia, a “gender queer femme non-binary but a man bodily,” expressed, in my opinion, an endearing way to frame his Trans experience: “When I was a kid, I didn’t know the word trans or anything. And I didn’t really feel like a boy or a girl per se. I just had like WAY TOO MUCH gender. . . . I just wanted to play with bugs and make cakes in my Easy Bake Oven and roll around in the mud in a tutu all at the same time, y’know.” Many Americans or non-Americans would not know any of these ways of experiencing life as a transgendered person. My students responded to those frank testimonies with compassion. Their take away was that gender identity was much more complex and fluid than the binaries of male and female. My students’ learned a lot from these voices of transgendered people and able to listen to narratives different from their own upbringing in an open, non-judgmental way.

To conclude, I wish to draw from a series of texts that students read for our last day of class that help reinforce many of the values that I model and expect all semester long. The authors of our textbook, *Gendered Voices Feminist Visions*, mention as well how personal integrity matters; how students need to figure out their own truths and priorities based on their own values and politics. In so doing they will know where to put their energy and figure out which battles are worth fighting. They pose the question: "Is your right still a right if it violates our rights or hurts a community?" They underscore how a peaceful and sustainable future is one that respects human dignity, celebrates difference and diversity, yet that diversity does not necessarily involve equality. In a different text, Byron Hurt, also provides important lessons for my class. Hurt talks about how he came to feminism on a personal journey upon realizing he was physically abusing his partners, as his father had done to his mother. He states: "not only does feminism give woman a voice, but it also clears the way for men to free themselves from the stranglehold of traditional masculinity." He concluded that "when we hurt the women in our lives, we hurt ourselves and we hurt our community too." Here we see the nexus between society and the self and how the individual (Byron's life) also implies the collective (the community). Finally, Yvette Alex-Assensoh talks about "sacrificial love" which echoes very much my pedagogy. She states that this kind of love "calls on us to be more patient, kind, respectful and truthful as well as look for the best in other people and situations." Over the semester with my students, we achieve a classroom of love. For me and Alex-Assensoh, "love embraces the highest forms of truth telling, in ways that involve empathy and inclusivity."