Melissa Figueroa
Teaching Philosophy

I am committed to provide students the tools to develop critical thinking, help them understand the need of diversity in higher education settings, and inspired them to consider the benefits of being independent and reflective learners. In the process, I create opportunities for them to connect their learning to the real world through the use of technology and motivate them to participate in initiatives that promote language, literature, and culture. These beliefs align with the [Mission](#) of the Department of Modern Languages at Ohio University, which recognize the study of language as fundamental to the liberal arts tradition of higher education.

I believe that learning is more effective when students become self-reliant. While I see myself as a facilitator in the classroom, I hope to prepare students to embark in their own on careers and travel abroad experiences. Therefore, I hope to show them how to teach themselves. I accomplish this objective by assigning homework before discussing readings, asking students to deduce grammar rules before I explain concepts, and privileging group discussions over lectures. In order to encourage self-reliance among students, I put emphasis on critical thinking. Therefore, I teach students to question how historical events, readings, and ideas have been interpreted through different ideological lenses. I stress the usefulness of identifying underlying assumptions or reasoning behind historical events. From my experience this skill helps students to evaluate a variety of points of view and encourages them to make an effort to understand others before judging or imposing their own views. I put this into practice in my Spanish civilization and culture course, where I have designed a mock United Nations summit meeting in which students debate Spain's legitimacy for membership in 1945. Students represent other countries, such as Germany, the United States, Italy, and Russia, as well as representatives from the Republican and Nationalist factions after the Spanish Civil War. As they present their cases, students need to use the information they have learned about the topic, but also come to understand multiple perspectives that played a role in the conflict. I encourage students to use their critical thinking skills into their own writing. In order to achieve this, I teach the basics of conducting research: distinguishing between subjects and topics, differentiating conceptual and practical problems, and understanding how to make a claim. I am particularly

pleased that several of my students have been able to employ the goals of my course during their own conference presentations.

I put emphasis on teaching students to understand the benefits and challenges of diversity in higher education settings. I welcome different perspectives and backgrounds through dialogues, role-plays, press conferences, and debates. Particularly, I use literary analysis to look into how literature spreads positive or negative views of a variety of cultures. As my own scholarship deals with diversity, I designed a graduate seminar on the representations of Muslims, Jews, Amerindians, Turks, and Blacks on the Spanish stage through the lens of Postcolonial theory. In this course, *Stereotypes in the Spanish Comedia*, I teach how different ethnic groups have been portrayed in Spanish theater during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I want students to think critically about the material I assign and stimulate them to understand the historical and ideological conditions that led playwrights to portray these characters in a particular manner. This has been an important factor in teaching the history, culture, and literature of Spain as students often equate the study of culture with more tangible aspects, such as food, music, and sports, instead of taking into consideration the social and historical conditions of the country. I also discuss issues of diversity using my own learning experience as a student in the Summer Institute for Diversity Education (SIDE), a program that trains faculty and staff on diversity issue. For instance, in Medieval and Golden Age Spanish literature, I assign the exercise "Four Corners." This exercise is an ice-breaker and it is designed to get participants reflecting on their own experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding gender, race, sexual orientation, and disability. As a facilitator, I ask several questions and provide four options as possible answers to each question in different corners of the classroom. This exercise facilitates the discussion about difficult topics to students and prepares them to be willing to engage with these topics in analyzing literary texts.

I invite students to turn their learning process into a reflective practice as a means to explore their strengths and limitations. My goal is that they understand that learning is a process and, as a consequence, measure their improvement departing from their unique experience. In my courses, students reflect on their learning through questionnaires, portfolios, and reflective essays. In teaching the *picaresque* genre, I invite them to write their own individual book projects, an exercise in which they have to write titles and short summaries of chapters describing their educational progress. This exercise helps students to connect with the

structure of most picaresque novels. In addition, it illustrates them how following their own path has taught them valuable learning lessons and has made them better learners. In the process of teaching students how to be reflective learners, I have become a reflective teacher. I review lesson plans after each class session to identify successful strategies, I attend professional development activities, and discuss course activities with faculty from my own unit and different departments.

Since technology can provide an interactive learning experience more customized to the needs of 21st century students, I pay particular attention to the use of technology both inside and outside the classroom. It is important to keep in mind that technological programs and applications are tools rather than a teaching strategy. Therefore, I use technology in designing activities, such as virtual tours, quizzes assigned through educational applications like Socrative or website platforms such as Blackboard, or online videos, after thinking of the learning outcomes. I also use video platforms to give students the opportunity to engage with their peers and the material to be discussed in the course. After the pandemic of 2020, I became more aware of the challenges and benefits of online teaching. Whereas I use technology in a face-to-face course as a supplement to my teaching, technology is a more central part of my instruction when teaching online. In effect, teaching a blended course has made me more selective with the material I assign to students, the manner I deliver a lecture in terms of concision and length, and the topics I want students to reflect in discussion forums. In addition, technology can also serve as an assessment tool that combines learning and creativity. For instance, when my course on Medieval and Golden Age Spanish literature was adapted to an online format, I replaced the traditional research paper with final projects that required the use of technology. Some of the students recreated an interview to writers from the seventeenth century and others designed a movie trailer based on a novel discussed in class. It has been a valuable lesson to learn that these projects allow students to connect better with the material and improve their oral skills in the target language.

I consider it important to motivate students. Motivated students are more open to learning, accepting new ideas, and receiving strong criticism. For this reason, I celebrate student successes by focusing, at least, one positive element of their writing, or sending congratulatory messages to the students who obtained the three highest scores on exams. At the same time, I stress to them that what they might see as a failure can be a learning opportunity. My goal is to

make students rely less on external factors (grades) and instead to strengthen the internal ones (pride, curiosity, self-trust etc.) in order to be independent learners. Students value this aspect of my teaching as is reflected in prevalent comments in my evaluations.

In order to connect my teaching goals to learning outcomes, I establish the grading criteria according to objectives of a specific course. I design a variety of assessment methods, such tests, essays, oral presentations, short responses, and portfolios. Although students receive extensive comments from me, the most important aspect of my grading is to give students a chance to identify their own mistakes and reflect on how to improve either their thinking, writing, or reading skills. For instance, for my advanced Spanish composition course, I mark students' mistakes followed by a code that allows students to analyze and assess their errors instead of simply providing the correct word or phrase myself. I strive to set high expectations in order to challenge students and prepare them to be successful in future courses. In order to grade a student's work in an objective and consistent manner, I design rubrics for essays and oral presentations. These rubrics explain the grading criteria in detail. In this sense, assessment functions as a learning tool since the explanations give students an idea of what is expected or acceptable in a research paper or oral presentation based on the discipline of literary criticism.

As an educator in foreign language, culture, and literature, I am constantly adapting course goals, modifying learning outcomes, and adjusting my instructional style to address the needs of my students. Yet, my engagement with teaching critical thinking, appreciating diversity, and encouraging reflective learning will remain constant.
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