

Teaching Philosophy

What you build is infinitely more important than what you tear down – Brittney Cooper

As a scholar, I study the intersections of health communication, digital and cultural rhetorics, and feminist care ethics. Our world is increasingly sociotechnical: the social influences the technical, and the technical influences the social (Costanza-Chock 2020). It is not possible to detangle writers, their writing, and technologies. I teach critical analysis of these intertwined factors and their impacts on health communication. Drawing on social justice scholarship from within rhetoric studies and professional and technical communication, I encourage students to develop not only practical tools but also critical thinking skills that benefit them in future workplace settings. Seeking to answer the call for action (Walton, Moore, and Jones 2019), and informed by Black feminist and Women of Color feminist scholarship, my teaching philosophy is centered on developing my students' knowledges and skills so that they can *ethically act* in diverse health communication practices.

There are three pedagogical underpinnings that are foundational to my teaching philosophy, curriculum development, and writing program administration.

I approach teaching pedagogy as feminist praxis.

Feminist pedagogy supports the ethic of care I encourage students to develop as they design and develop deliverables related to health issues, patient care, and vulnerable topics. Being a feminist teacher is being a feminist in the classroom: "Feminism is praxis. We enact the world we are aiming for; nothing less will do." (Ahmed 2017, 255). Because the classroom is often a space of power dynamics and inequities, I strive to create a space of more equal power and voice. I follow the lead of Black feminists and Women of Color feminists who call for recognition of embodied knowledges as expertise and for the dismantling of oppressive systems of power that disproportionately impact Black and Indigenous People of Color (Collins 1990; hooks 1994; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981).

I do this by practicing and teaching care. I see care as a legitimate feminist practice through which I can interact with each student as a full human with unique lived experiences, work and family to worry about, and other valid responsibilities that cause stress and complications during the semester. This is reflected in equitable syllabus policies, regular reflection opportunities, and one-on-one informal conferences with me. One recurring activity that students appreciate each semester are holistic health check in's, during which they find a spot outside of the classroom to do a reflective meditation activity that encourages writing, drawing, and doodling. Students then check in with me about how it went. I also prioritize knowing students personally and reaching out to those who I haven't heard from in a while. This is evident in my efforts to unburden them from class-related stress by making my syllabus language, LMS site, and assignment instructions easy to understand so that students know what is expected of them. In these ways and others, I support students in pursuing their end goals, from just passing the class to gaining deeper knowledge and skills that can support their future endeavors.

I design classroom experiences to uncover and act on non-neutrality in writing and technology.

Scholars of technical and professional writing have claimed that neither language (Baker-bell 2020) nor technology (Wajcman 2009) are neutral. Rhetoricians studying health communication (Segal 2008; Scott and Meloncon 2017) have also pointed to issues with healthcare discourses, technologies, and bias. Myths of neutrality support a false narrative of objectivity within health communication. This masks the truth: white heteropatriarchal norms dominate the field. Scholars within health communication have specific skills that can equip students to reorient themselves to and change these realities (Haas and Eble 2018).

I apply these ideas by creating classroom experiences where students can question, critique, and learn in a space less controlled by policies, requirements, or me. We start with lower stakes activities such as rhetorically analyzing a health flyer or digital infographic. *Who is the audience? What message is being communicated? How is the audience being appealed to?* Then, we consider genres such as patient intake forms, internal emails, and research reports. We interrogate how and why standards have been put into place and who is included, or not, in the design and content. As students collaboratively work through what it means to be “clear” and “concise,” they also critically engage with who is being imagined as the audience and what knowledges of language or decorum are assumed. By guiding students in critically analysis of writing and technologies, I teach them to question the narrative of neutrality and to imagine more socially just methods of communication.

I create inclusive space for the embodied knowledges of students and community building.

Deconstructing power creates a more collaborative learning space. When students are worried about tests, essay scores, and final grades, they are not focused on learning. They are in survival mode. Like the banking model of education (Freire 1970), this does not teach students how to engage in the workplace or in their communities. Creating an inclusive space where each positionality in the classroom is a source of valid knowledge allows students to know themselves and each other more genuinely (Cedillo et al 2018). By building community, students are also more willing to work collaboratively and share their writing.

I strive to create inclusive space by creating opportunities for students to lead class discussions and activities, using humane grading practices, and embracing failure. By humane, I mean that each student is graded based on quality and effort as well as based on reflective writings that allow them to evaluate their own deliverables critically and honestly. To accomplish this, as a class we collaboratively write community guidelines that everyone commits to upholding so that all embodied knowledges are valued equally. These are posted on our LMS course page. We have regular check in’s – as a class and me with students one-on-one, to review how we are all upholding our community commitments. By prioritizing community through this and other practices, students feel more comfortable in working through questions together, grappling with complex topics, and supporting each other that is sometimes class-related but is many times community-related. I strive to give students more control; this requires a willingness to try, fail, and pivot. I embrace my own failure and am transparent with students about it. Every group of students is different and requires a different community-building environment. At times, they may not want to connect at all, because they just want to pass the class, and that’s okay, too. Creating an inclusive space where students want to build community and share from their embodied knowledges benefits classroom learning and student success.

These pedagogical practices frame my approach to teaching whether it be first year composition, health communication, or other courses. My goal as a teacher is for students to deepen their rhetorical dexterity across a range of communicative skills and deepen their critical and ethical awareness so that can see not only the social injustices in this world, but also the seeds of possibilities within themselves to enact change through their own everyday actions. In this way, my teaching philosophy embodies the feminist call to build the world we are hoping for.