

In high school, my two favorite teachers were best friends. Mr. Degenhardt and Mr. Mulvey were both remarkable English teachers by themselves, but in a room together, they became a comedy duo, trading jokes and stories with perfect poise and timing. Both were indubitably inspirations for my eventual decision to become a teacher. Though the two teachers were as close as could be, their teaching styles were polar opposites. Mr. Degenhardt was traditional in the most traditional sense, reading and lecturing to six straight rows of students, each of whom would recite the same poem or turn in the same strict theme. Mr. Mulvey, a jovial “progressive,” sat with his students in a large circle, guiding discussion and, often, student performances. Now, though, I realize from their indelible imprints on my life that in spite of their different styles, they got along so well because their *philosophies* were so similar. As a teacher, it is my aspiration not to mimic their teaching styles, but to find the best way I can *teach* the way they did.

“Words, words, words,” read the quote from Hamlet, in six-inch letters on Mr. Degenhardt’s wall. My educational philosophy is rooted in an abiding love of words and language. I believe I must help my students develop a meaningful relationship with language. Certainly, not all students will “love” words, but it is essential that students come to appreciate what language *does*, and the power it holds. In that respect, my philosophy is influenced by the theories of critical literacies. Language is integral to students’ lives: they use it every day, in every sort of interaction. And for better or for worse, others will judge them by the language they use, and others will use language in an attempt to influence them. By presenting students with a wide variety of texts—fictions, poems, essays, news, web hypertexts—they will have the chance not only to enjoy the language, but to develop critical strategies to approach texts every day. At the same time, these various texts must be held together by meaningful and consistent contexts. This can be as simple as supplementing a novel with other short literature to give new perspectives and information, or as complex as asking students to synthesize their own text from a collection of sources.

This critical approach to words goes hand-in-hand with my broader beliefs in experiential education. “Learning by doing” is not some tired cliché—I believe that meaningful experiences are essential to learning. As a teacher, I hope to be like the cab driver who tells guests about the places they might like, rather than the tour guide who drags guests from attraction to attraction, telling them what to watch and what to ignore. Different students benefit from different learning experiences; thus, I intend to provide experiences which are appealing and challenging for all students. This variety can include

different approaches to group and individual experiences, as well as experiencing and creating texts of all kinds. When appropriate, two students can in fact participate in completely differentiated experiences within the same class. Differentiation must not become “tracking”—interests, intellectual strengths, and challenges are opportunities to differentiate as much as ability level.

While these approaches allow me to address the needs of the students in a progressive and critical manner, I cannot abandon that which is good and necessary in more traditional styles of teaching. I have a responsibility to my students not only to see that they learn, but also to make sure they can communicate what they have learned. That includes not only the ability to test well, but to speak and write properly, and to be conversant with a common body of literature. A student must grasp the fundamentals of language—grammar, spelling, jargon—to negotiate with his or her future. Society is full of high-stakes tests, college applications, and employment opportunities which demand a command of the English language. Critical literacies and experiential education provide many opportunities to teach these basic skills, both in context and explicitly.

Like Mr. Degenhardt and Mr. Mulvey, my style will be my own. My philosophy will certainly evolve as I learn more and become a more experienced teacher, but its essence will remain: a teacher must help students develop the skills to negotiate the texts of their everyday lives, and the ability to communicate what they learn from language. This is essential in forming human beings who are skilled, critical, and thoughtful.