

James Newlin
Teaching Statement

To prepare the students of my British literature survey for a unit on adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, I lecture on the basics of film production and analysis. After class, one of my students approached me and jokingly complained, "You've *ruined* movies for me! Now I can't just sit and watch *anything* without thinking about the shot length or camera angles!" With each of my classes, I aim to "ruin" the act of reading in this way, disrupting my students' instincts to "just sit" passively with an assigned text. As an instructor, I focus on enriching these skills of interpretative reading and critical inquiry through a dialogic, student-centered pedagogy.

One effective way of initiating a vibrant dialogue between students is to subtract my own voice from the discussion. In a Renaissance drama course, I will offer a simply worded prompt—i.e. "Is Marlowe's *Edward II* homophobic?" "Is *King Lear* a religious play?"—set a kitchen timer, and remain silent until the alarm rings. At first, students are overwhelmed by a need to fill the silence, but as they respond to one another without any expectation of their instructor's approval, they gradually explore unexpected connections between the course readings and their own ideological or aesthetic expectations. I can then refer to their specific comments later in class discussion, as examples of potential topics for further exploration in research projects.

Group projects also enable collaborative dialogue between students. For example, I dedicate a class session to an impromptu academic conference, providing small groups of students with differing thesis statements, and giving them half the class period to prepare a presentation. In a survey of British literature, I might ask my class to consider the influence of texts read earlier in the semester—*Everyman*, Chaucer, Malory—on *The Faerie Queene*. Then, I require one group of students to argue that Spenser's epic is fundamentally derivative, while asking another to argue that it is fundamentally original. The exercise is a variation of Peter Elbow's "believing game." Students briefly convince themselves, as well as their classmates, of a point with which they may not agree. This prepares them for the engagement with diverse viewpoints in formal research projects, while also introducing them to the conventions of academic presentations.

A multi-modal classroom extends the conversations between students to one between students and their own writing. Requiring participation on a class weblog guarantees that students take the discussion home with them, retaining course material while also reflecting upon their role in the learning process. I encourage this reflection by referring to the blog in class, either as the source of discussion topics or as examples of student writing. In an early English literature class, students regularly examine electronic facsimiles of manuscripts and "bad" quartos. When students consider that even literary masterworks exist in "drafts," they understand their reflections in class and on the blog as an important first step in the processes of critical practice.

My academic research often engages psychoanalysis, and my reading in that field informs my pedagogy. Both teaching and analysis involve close listening for what Shoshana Felman calls "unmeant knowledge" – the flashes of insight that, through the steps of interpretation, may lead to profound critical statements. By encouraging students to debate their own responses, as well as those of their classmates, I communicate a sense of the dialogic process of academic inquiry.