

*Sample teaching statement from a graduate student in Communication and Culture. She was successful in her search for a tenure-track job at a teaching-focused school.*

- *What do you believe you know about her teaching from what she has written?*
- *What questions remain for you about her teaching?*

**NAME**

**Teaching statement**

When I taught Introduction to Popular Culture as a first year graduate student, I asked my freshman students to do a study of their everyday lives. What did their typical day look like? What did they eat? How did they decorate their dorm room? The purpose of the paper was to generate reflection on the role played by popular culture in our daily routines; however, I learned from those papers that my students were homesick, malnourished, sleep deprived, busy, conscientious, talented, and more eager to talk than had been my impression. Those papers reminded me of the many obstacles newer students face, and how disorienting and uncomfortable school can be. My research into education has further raised my awareness of school as a material enterprise made up of physical and virtual spaces that students must learn to navigate before they can learn anything else. These observations inspire my efforts to generate a classroom atmosphere in which everyone feels invited to take part, and to break complex concepts into manageable exercises so that students feel equipped to do the work necessary to build communication and argumentative skills.

I believe that the goal of learning is not to become comfortable, but rather to acquire the skills with which to engage the unfamiliar, and that such skills will serve students well into their future lives. To that end, I prefer to frame my student's accomplishments, not as the accumulation of information, but as degrees of empowerment. It is my hope that through the acquisition of communication and argumentative skills, students gain a sense that the social world is not "fixed" by either natural or remote laws. More importantly, I want them to see that they possess the means of social transformation. To achieve this, I strive to show students two related ideas: the constructed-ness of truth claims, and how themselves to construct arguments. Since I cannot merely tell them, I work instead to build critical consciousness of the constitutive power of language. When I teach about metaphor in Public Speaking, for instance, I ask students to generate a metaphor for a cultural value, such as honesty, from a random item that I've assigned to them, such as dry erase boards. This is to underscore that what we perceive as a good metaphor is the effect of discursive technique and not due to the appropriateness of the comparison. One class agreed that dry erase boards had nothing to do with honesty until a student suggested that, "honesty allows us to wipe away mistakes." From this exercise, I ease into a related and typically charged discussion on metaphors for war. The goal of the discussion is to evaluate different metaphors, not by their aptness, but by the success of each in highlighting and obscuring various characteristics of war. Reference to the earlier exercise helps to remind students during this discussion why "appropriate" is a troubled criterion by which to judge a metaphor.

It is understandable that students often find school tiring and disorienting. Classrooms are not always comfortable places; small desks in windowless rooms can be unpleasant, and there is a certain amount of discomfort involved in learning, for instance, how to give a speech or participate in a discussion on a controversial topic. In spite of this discomfort, I wish for students

to experience my classes as the taking part in a community and activity that they feel capable of navigating. To offset feelings of boredom and alienation, I encourage students to think of the productive discomfort of learning as an encounter with the unfamiliar. Since learning new things can be scary and frustrating, one of my principle teaching strategies is to build routine into a course so that encounters with the unfamiliar always contain a familiar element. When I teach Public Speaking, I start each day by asking a low-key question, such as, "what is your favorite movie?" I require that everyone stand up to answer the question, address the entire room, and use a complete sentence. This simple exercise reinforces public speaking as a corporeal and discursive exercise that requires arranging both words as well as one's body. I took a similar approach when teaching Introduction to Communication and Culture, a course that requires reading and retaining the ideas of a range of cultural theorists. Throughout lectures and class discussions, I asked how a specific author might respond to the topic at hand. What might Oscar Wilde say, for instance, about Erving Goffman's theories of performance? This exercise introduces new theories by building on those with which students are already familiar, and gives practice in the complex and sometimes intimidating process of thinking in someone else's terms. Students have reported that they found these exercises to be useful. One student wrote in an evaluation: "She was very helpful and capable of turning difficult topics and readings into understandable course concepts that we needed to know."

For each course I teach, I seek ways to break down theoretical ideas into manageable exercises in order that students might build the skills needed to put those ideas into practice. One of the challenges is learning to anticipate the ways students might misunderstand, and the difficulties they might encounter with projects. This is a continuous learning process for me, as things don't always go as planned. For instance, a student in Argumentation and Public Advocacy once chose to write an argument in favor of legalizing marriage between same-sex couples, which happened to be the topic as that of a sample paper written by a former instructor. I approved the topic because in my mind there were numerous ways to approach it. However, while writing, the student discovered that her argument mirrored the one in the example. Afraid she would be accused of plagiarism, she approached me defensively and attributed the similarities between the papers to the inevitability of the argument. After talking with her, I was convinced that she had indeed done her own research, but had missed the more valuable lesson about the structure of argument. There were many arguments to be made, I explained, in favor of (or in opposition to) gay marriage, and the one offered in the sample paper seemed like the "right" one only because it was well structured. Constructing different statements of fact, value, and policy, she could write an entirely different and equally compelling argument. The many exercises we had done in class on how to write claims enabled her, I believe, to understand the distinction I was making, and we agreed that I could only assess her ability to *invent* an argument if she re-wrote the paper, which she did. I was happy that we were able to come to a resolution, but that event signaled to me that I had fallen short of my own teaching goal. While she understood in the end, my goal is to help students understand before they start their projects. There is no reason why, equipped with the necessary skills, every student in my class couldn't generate fantastic new arguments for social change. My wish is to provide them the skills and inspiration to do so.