Kristin Lacey Teaching Statement

Community building and student agency are the two principles that guide every decision I make in the classroom. From my first email to students to our last class session, I focus on building relationships and instilling a sense of ownership in students—ownership of their learning and the trajectory of our class. As a first-generation college graduate, I know how important it is to meet students where they are. Students often enter my introductory classes having had negative experiences with writing or understanding literary studies as merely identifying symbols or other literary devices in a text. I want my students to come away with an expansive understanding of literature, an understanding that includes how a variety of “lenses”—race, gender, class, ability, time, nationality, to name a few—shape texts and our interpretations. I strive to show students the contemporary relevance of literary texts and critical conversations; in my course “Women and Madness in Literature,” we read canonical texts like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” alongside episodes of *Broad City* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,* tracing the evolution of figures like the witch and the so-called crazy ex-girlfriend. Students have followed up with me years later to share how our course continues to shape their views about gender in their scholarship and in their understanding of the world.

With each semester I teach, I ask more of my students. By “more,” I don’t mean more reading and writing, but more investment in building a meaningful classroom community together. Asking students to regularly provide feedback on the class’s progression and their experience teaches students—particularly those who are reticent to ask for help or speak up in class—that they have agency in shaping their educational experience. I often begin a semester by asking students to share their current associations of the topic—satire, women and madness in literature, and nineteenth-century American literature, for example—and drawing a concept map on the board. On the last day of the semester, students return to the larger picture of the course topic. This exercise encourages students to view the progression of their views over the semester; it also demonstrates that education is not meant to lead us to rigid conclusions, but to challenge ourselves to think critically and form our own evidence-informed arguments about the texts we study. Establishing a baseline before we begin our work together honors the whole of students’ personhood and learning.

Students take ownership of their experience in my classroom by giving feedback throughout the semester in what I call a “Post-it check-in:” I ask students to anonymously write what works well for them about our class or what they’re struggling with; they then leave the Post-its on the wall or board on their way out. Afterward, I adjust in-class activities, discussion structures, or reading schedules to reflect their needs. Students are incredibly thoughtful, even in the space of a Post-it, about their experience and their genuine investment in improving their work. Even if I am unable to change lesson plans in the days following a check-in, a verbal acknowledgement goes a long way: “I know some of you are confused about passive voice—how to find it and how to change it—and we’re going to do an exercise next week that should help.” Always returning to students’ needs encourages students to view the class as more fully theirs and leads to better discussions, papers, and projects.

Amid the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, my priority has been to establish my online classroom as a space for joy, support, and honesty. During the Fall 2020 semester, I instated weekly check-ins at the top of class; students shared what was going well for them and what they struggled with in daily life. In their course evaluations, students noted their appreciation for this opportunity to open up with their peers: “She was incredibly helpful and thoughtful throughout the course, taking time to check in with us emotionally and mentally during difficult times.” Another student stated that the class was “encouraging, emotionally and academically.” In the face of countless converging national crises, I consider my students’ understanding of our class as a place for support and connection to be my greatest pedagogical success.