

---

# STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Eric Newsom | enewsom@gmail.com

---

**Teaching should be about more than what is in the course title.** Students expect to end the semester with some sort of basic knowledge or skill set. A decent teacher will enable them to achieve this. A better teacher will suggest ways in which the material is connected to the world outside the classroom. The best teacher will encourage students to develop their capacity for critical thinking and communication in learning to express for themselves what those connections are and what they mean.

**Classrooms should be a conversation.** Students learn best through dialogue with their teacher, not through being subjected to a monologue from a podium. Teachers teach best when they are aware of the unique viewpoints that students are bringing to the material. Students can learn just as much from their connections with each other. I prefer classrooms where students face each other and are aware of themselves as a group of people in deep consideration of the same subject. I like to foster a classroom environment where students feel comfortable testing ideas amongst themselves, by initiating conversations around class goals and implementing peer review as part of the planning and drafting process. I encourage conversations among students outside of the classroom as well, through classroom management software, forums, or social networks.

**Assignments should have stakes.** When I was a composition instructor, I drew on Peter Elbow's ideas on low-stakes writing, wherein students begin with personal narratives, to get into the practice of writing, before moving onto more academic forms. Though the early assignments I gave were deemed "low stakes," I always made a point of emphasizing that stakes still existed, and what those stakes were. All assignments should have purpose beyond just giving students practice at a task. If these assignments are practice for work that students will one day do outside of the classroom, then students should be aware of the stakes that would exist in non-academic situations. For example, a web design project should meet accessibility requirements. When possible, I like to bring in real-world assignments for students. In my composition classes, we often did work developing content for local charities. Student investment in projects grew because the stakes were higher.

**Students, and therefore teachers, should be acquainted with the state of the art.** Teachers should be aware of changing situations that come from developments in technology. This means, for instance, that a course in writing for the web should be more than just coding HTML, and should address the nature of social networks, aggregated content, mobile devices, podcasts, video, etc. As with technology, teachers should also strive to stay abreast of developments in scholarship. By remaining active in both practice and research, one becomes the best possible resource for students.

**However, students should also be prepared for the technologies to come after they leave the classroom.** Staying abreast of new technologies does not, however, mean that the best methodology involves teaching the latest version of the software. Even as teachers acquaint students with the nuts and bolts of working with technology, so should they lead them to question the technology itself. Students who learn the fundamentals and question why and how we use technology, as opposed to what technology to use for which task, will be much better equipped to handle waves of future developments.

**Teachers should be willing to reassess, reconfigure, reassemble.** I once had a course taught by a professor who bragged of using the same syllabus for 30 years. It was therefore no surprise to the students who assembled there every Monday morning that the course had gone stale. The professor lectured from yellowed index cards, seldom engaged the students or even made eye contact with them, and, through dispassionate analyses, drove us away from material in which we had interest at the beginning of the semester. And yet I remain thankful for the example this professor set. I hope never to be so firmly entrenched in my ways that I refuse to regularly reassess my abilities as teacher. This means not slavishly carrying over a syllabus from one semester to the next without reevaluation. This means regularly scrutinizing reading lists for gaps and omissions. This means frequently reconsidering methods of classroom management and student engagement. This means taking course evaluations and student feedback seriously. This means a constant awareness of not only shortcomings, but successes as well. This also means that my teaching philosophy may change as I gain more experience in the classroom, and I am happy for that to be the case.