

Statement of Teaching Philosophy | Carolyn D. Commer

My approach to teaching is influenced by my undergraduate training in a philosophical tradition and my graduate training in a rhetorical tradition. These rivaling traditions come together in my teaching practice as a balanced commitment to providing students both theories and pragmatic skills for public engagement.

In my course design, I strengthen potential for public engagement by giving students multi-modal approaches for producing public discourse. In my non-profit advocacy course, for example, we examine the challenges and opportunities for non-profits that are brought on by a digital age—online newsletters, blogs, websites, and fundraising sites. In teaching professional and technical communication, I introduce students to new modes of public speaking performance in online spaces. Using TedTalks as a case example, I workshop six core adaptation concepts that are often employed when communicating technical information to non-expert audiences. Students craft their own expert-to-non-expert presentations and perform them in class to an audience of peers across a diversity of majors.

I approach my classroom as a proto-public space where discussion is key for engagement. In my experience, valuable class discussions do not simply happen, and not all discussions—even exciting and impassioned discussions—are necessarily productive if they exclude some students, if they rush toward agreement, or if they fail to push students to reconsider an issue in an alternate way. I've found that leading class discussion, like any aspect of course design, usually requires scaffolding: clear expectations, time for preparation, guiding questions, and norms for in-class disagreement. Since students are sometimes resistant or uncomfortable with conflict in the classroom, I use Linda Flower's concept of "rivaling" so my students can practice ways for introducing conflicting perspectives, with prompts such as: "A rival *could* say..." While not a guarantee for meeting the ideals of deliberative engagement, I've found this technique helps level the playing field and give footing to students who are learning to engage in academic-style discussion for the first time.

To help students put theory into practice, I incorporate scenario-based case studies whenever possible. In one lesson plan in rhetorical grammar, for example, we explore the history of the passive voice construction—one of the most unique and misunderstood facets of the English language. I give students sample texts to revise using active and passive verbs to either create topical cohesion or to shift agency and ethical responsibility. Drawing examples from social media and news reports from the school's *Tartan* newspaper, students then perform scenarios in which they are the editor and must provide multiple grammatical accounts of when the passive voice is preferable in a given example. Through practice in collaborative, visual diagramming, students move beyond explanations of grammatical correctness to more nuanced accounts of grammatical *form* and rhetorical *function*.

In the spirit of both the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of the liberal arts, I give students concrete opportunities for putting rhetorical theory into practice. While the ability to offer detailed rhetorical or grammatical accounts will undoubtedly help students become strong writers of their academic work, my hope is that it will also help them become more active participants in public life outside of the classroom, too.