

Teaching Portfolio
Robyn Whitney d’Avignon

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Statement of Teaching Philosophy

History reveals structural inequalities and the built environment to be neither natural nor inevitable, but rather the product of ongoing material and political struggles. This insight gives students concrete tools to reimagine the world they want to live in—as one informed, but not determined, by past injustices. African history and science and technology studies offer powerful opportunities for students to test these principles against the past and their own experiences. Since its emergence as an academic discipline in the 1960s, the teaching of African history has been a political act. It insists on the radical and violent interdependence of the ‘modern world,’ revealing how the United States and Europe systematically profited from African culture, ideas, and exploited labor. The history of science and technology, on the other hand, troubles the assumption that science, medicine, and nature exist independently of culture and politics.

At the University of Michigan, I have worked as an assistant teacher for courses in science studies and anthropology. For these positions, I designed weekly assignments and discussion sections, composed and graded exams, and gave occasional lectures. I am currently teaching a competitively selected course that I designed for the history department. This writing seminar is entitled “Saving Africa: Writing Humanitarian History.” Below, I detail two examples of how I integrate my core pedagogical values into the classroom and in public humanities outreach.

While assistant teaching for “Science, Technology, Medicine and Society,” I designed an in-class exercise and essay assignment on how seemingly mundane ‘technical’ categories can be laden with assumptions about gender, class, race, and history. I asked students to analyze worksheets used by the University of Michigan from 1998 to 2003 to determine admissions decisions—a case study intimately related to their own lives. During this time period, admissions were based on quantified metrics, but a 2003 Supreme Court case ruled the system unconstitutional for its mechanistic implementation of affirmative action that gave significant points to minority applicants, regardless of other achievements. I first set up a classroom debate on the following questions: What values were embodied in the category of ‘race’? Why did points for race become an object of contestation, but not points for the SAT? What variables and privileges go into SAT scores that are not visible on this form? I then provided the class with statistics on the declining numbers of students of color at Michigan since the 2003 ruling. Students wrote essays on how, if at all, this information changed their views on the quantification of race in admissions. This exercise opened up the question of privilege in the classroom and evidenced how categories produced a particular kind of student body. It also gave me a concrete opportunity to explain how worksheets can be used as historical sources; in this case, as data about how a public university placed a number value on historic injustice.

The first-year writing seminar I am currently teaching introduces students to college-level composition and the study of Africa’s past from the perspective of humanitarian intervention. I chose this topic for two primary reasons. For one, it challenges the assumption that helping others is separable from broader geopolitical and economic motivations. Second, the topic dismantles stereotypes—held widely by students at a diverse public university—of Africa as impoverished, war-torn, and diseased. Through primary sources, historical photography and academic articles, students learn that Euro-Americans have long framed Africans as victims in need of moral uplift, to justify projects as diverse as the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial conquest. The course also reveals that empire-building projects and humanitarian intervention in

Africa share a deep history. I carry this theme into the present day by introducing students to men and women from diverse African countries who are seeking asylum in Michigan with the assistance of a Detroit-based non-profit. By listening to the stories of asylum seekers, students begin to disaggregate the mediatized image of refugees as faceless victims of far-away turmoil. Rather, students learn that asylum seekers are often educated and cosmopolitan entrepreneurs.

My strengths as a teacher are tied not only to institutional training but also to my sustained commitment to social justice and a curiosity in perspectives far different from my own. I began nurturing these values and skills while teaching English language courses to African refugees as an undergraduate in St. Louis, Missouri. Later, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal I designed courses in marketing in French and Fulfulde for a women's technical high school and for village-level gardeners, most of whom were illiterate. Household gardens and sorghum fields served as our classrooms and lessons incorporated the inputs of spouses, children, and elders.

I have continued this commitment to community-based learning and outreach at Michigan. Since August 2014, I have managed an oral history project on African migration to Detroit, funded by the Global Midwest Project. This past summer I trained two undergraduates in oral history and interviewing methods. I also conducted interviews with African immigrants and asylum seekers throughout southeastern Michigan. In the summer of 2016 we plan to launch a multi-media digital archive to showcase our research for the general public. This fall, as a fellow in Michigan's Engaged-Pedagogy Initiative, I am designing a course on 'Conquering Nature' that generates a historical and theoretical context for students to analyze the state management of farmland, water, and minerals. Developed with the input of an undergraduate task force, this course is divided evenly between the classroom and engagement with scientists and government agencies in Michigan. Case studies include Detroit's water crisis and the recruitment of snipers to manage Michigan's deer and wolf population. I could readily adapt this course to case studies based on environmental controversies in rural Connecticut and in greater New York City.

I do not aspire to convert students to my discipline. Rather, I want them to be critical thinkers and rigorous writers—skills necessary for success in any career. An excellent undergraduate education endeavors to transform students into citizens with an appreciation for the fact that being a neighbor is a moral concept rather than geographic happenstance. I teach these values by designing courses focused on the historic origins of social, political, and economic inequity. Diversity in the classroom can also manifest through divergent learning styles and uneven exposure to content from high school curriculums. I accommodate diverse learning styles and student backgrounds by pairing text-based assignments with projects that ask students to analyze photographs, recorded sound, and films as historical sources. This allows visual learners an opportunity to exercise their strengths, while ensuring that all students practice writing skills.

My teaching portfolio is comparative and transnational in scope. I am prepared to teach surveys in pre-colonial and modern African history. These introductory courses would provide the basis for mid-level and advanced classes on topics such as "A Global History of Development and Humanitarianism," "Environment and Society in Africa," and "The Black Atlantic: Africa and the Americas since 1450." While my core discipline is African history, I am also trained in environmental anthropology and hold a Graduate Certificate in Science, Technology, and Society. Based on your department's needs, I am excited to teach surveys and advanced seminars in environmental history, science and technology studies, and field research methods.