

SONNY KELLY: TEACHING STATEMENT

“Ago!” I shout at the beginning of an 8:30am class session, catching a few of my groggier students by surprise as they fumble their way to their seats through a gauntlet of loaded backpacks. From the sprightly morning birds to the sluggish night owls, I notice a flash of familiarity and excitement cross their faces. They can sense it in me and in one another as well. I am a storyteller and a story builder. It is through the modes of story that I engage my students, my research, and my life. Trained in the West African tradition of oral storytelling, I learned many years ago that storytellers in Ghana are all at once teachers, historians, spiritual leaders, and motivational speakers. They often begin a story by calling out “Ago!” (a word in the Twi language, pronounced “Aahgoh”). Spoken with the authority of a command “Ago!” might translate to “Listen up!”, but from the mouth of a dialogic teacher and storyteller like me, it translates to “Are you listening?”, or, better yet -- “Are you willing to learn?” I open with this call to engagement as a reminder that effective teaching can take place only if learning takes place, and effective learning takes place only when we willingly and actively engage the process together. After the call, I notice that my students’ eyes alight and they respond in unison, “Amay!” (the Twi word for, “I am listening,” or “I am willing to learn”, pronounced, “Ahmay”). With this simple call-and-response, we have initiated the critical, challenging, sometimes contentious process of learning and growing together. This is my daily commitment to a practice of critical pedagogy that transforms the teacher, students, and our larger communities.

To initiate and facilitate the learning process, I always lead by example. With my 3D model (Demonstrate-Dialogue-Develop) of teaching and self-expression (as articulated in my dissertation, *Pipelines to Pathways: Performatively Reframing and Reclaiming Black Youth Identity*), I lead by demonstrating. For example, I often perform excerpts from my autoethnographical performance piece *The Talk* in class. *The Talk* is a 75-minute one-person show that I have performed for over 4,000 audience members across the U.S. since 2018. I usually perform 10 to 15 minutes of the piece to inform the course content, encourage vulnerable and courageous self-expression, and to spur conversations with students around race, performance, ethnography, literature, public speaking, activism, identity formation, interpersonal, and intercultural communication. After experiencing an excerpt of *The Talk*, one student told me, “You really made me *feel* your story. I want to learn how to do that with mine.”

Next, we dialogue about the course content and its place in our lives (motivated by the opportunity to be heard, and the valuable participation points at stake!). For example, in a Performing African and African American History course, I challenged students to seek out and speak out the connections they found between their own stories and some of the literature that they had read by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In the discovery and telling of their stories, students were drawn to laughter, tears, and new revelations. For example, one student shared how disappointed he was in his big sister for getting pregnant out of wedlock. However, when he leaned into his sister’s perspective, he began to understand what Adichie meant by “the danger of a single story.” By reflecting on this experience and Adichie’s writing, this student was able to reframe his understanding of gender expectations and performativity. His heartfelt fun loving recollections of being wrapped around his new niece’s little finger as he embraced a new commitment to feminism brought the whole class to laughter and tears.

Finally, my students and I work to develop future demonstrations of our own new understanding of the material that we gained through the process. The capstone project of this particular course was a staged reading of one of Ngozi Adichie’s stories and excerpts from her seminal lectures

SONNY KELLY: TEACHING STATEMENT

“The Danger of a Single Story” and “We Should all be Feminists” on the main stage at UNC Chapel Hill, before an audience of 1,000 people and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie herself. Every one of the students shared a personal story on stage that intersected with the reading, and only one of the students had been trained in performance prior to the course. At the end of the performance, Adichie thanked the students through her tears for bringing her work to life. This experience confirmed my belief that humans are linked together inextricably by our stories and the openings that allow them to enter and engage our collective consciousness.

I train students through a mode of establishing muscle memory through rituals, patterns, predictable syllabi, and consistent class session flow. Then, toward the end of the course (earlier for higher level courses), I throw in what some exercise enthusiasts refer to as “muscle confusion.” This tactic requires the athletic trainer to present the athlete with new physical challenges and movements designed to increase her strength, endurance, and range of motion. I do this academically by challenging my students to be intellectually agile, emotionally vulnerable, and academically critical. This process offers all of my students the opportunity to develop what Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset,” wherein they themselves commit to the perpetual process of growing intellectually, emotionally, and professionally, regardless of their starting point. Thus, my classroom becomes a vibrant community that serves as a courageous space of learning, inclusion, mutual respect, self-expression, and the pursuit of excellence.

For example, in my Fundamentals of Speech & Communication course, I require students to collaborate for a large group project wherein they use the skills attained in the course to serve local non-profit organizations by developing tailor-made social awareness campaigns. Students in my performance classes present ensemble performances wherein they learn the power of collective creativity and collaborative scholarship. Furthermore, I establish a classroom climate wherein students learn to continually invest in others by critical attention and regular thoughtful feedback. Each student’s personal success is of great concern to me and to their peers. Therefore, assignments are designed to enrich and enhance students’ pursuit of individual and collective objectives by pulling together the human, intellectual and material resources available in the classroom. Countless students have amazed themselves by sharing deep questions, concerns, or challenges that they never felt safe or able to share publicly before they entered this space.

Practical application is central to all of my assignments, such as a mock job interview for which students must find an actual job offering that is appropriate for their own job search, or performances designed to address social and cultural concerns based upon the students’ own concerns. One of my Introduction to Performance students, Luke Buxton told me that he was so inspired by my call for students to mobilize stories to do good work in the world that he began a project called UNCUT - a “student-led and athlete-driven” project that combines photography, video, and journalism, to provide student athletes “a platform to be their true selves. With a commitment to [...] spotlight the humanity inherent within each and every student-athlete.”

My classroom is a safe space where students and teacher depend on each other to learn more and apply lessons learned for the betterment of our lives and communities. For example, the first assignment in my class is for students to research the linguistic, historical, and familiar etymology of their names. This gets them asking crucial questions like, “Who am I?” and “What am I going to do in the world?” So, we begin with a call to engaged learning and we continually aim toward developing stories, knowledge, and action, that will do good work in the world.