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Philosophy of Teaching and Mentoring, 2024

I consider myself an ethnographer, an observer and appreciator of stories. The stories behind who we are and why we *do* matter, and that even within a contextually same experience (such as a classroom), individual experiences may be considerably different. This acknowledgment of the social and ecological has become my guide to inclusive teaching whether in the theoretical sense or in modality, for I am at the core cognizant of equity while embracing difference. My path to becoming an adjunct faculty member at George Mason University was unexpected. My cut-throat professional beginnings were in marketing and support in Washington, D.C. law firms and a controversial tobacco lobbying organization, where I learned the ins and outs of politics, advocacy, and corporate structure. These were quite different from where I landed in a global and community health focus, but I took the road less traveled.

I was a political science undergraduate student at George Mason University in the late 80s and a resident advisor in a co-ed dorm, when the campus was just a handful of buildings. However, due to family issues, I left Mason at the end of my junior year. Returning years later just barely within the grace period, I rapidly finishing my undergraduate degree now as a single mother. To be honest, my undergraduate experience at GMU had been less than optimal. At that time, Mason was still largely a commuter campus, so student life and other resources were still developing. The valuable social capital and support resources that we now have here at Mason could have potentially helped me stay the course back then, so I do my best to be aware of what we have here now and connect our students. I think that *because I have been there* that I am especially aware of the challenges of international students, first-gen students, parents, working students, and those who may have varied challenges or social determinants of health that compound their academic experiences making success inequitably more difficult. I strive to consistently grow in this area, so if I think I could also be blinded to someone else's barriers, I try and stay up to date on inclusion trainings and topics and track social media because that is also where our students share and seek information.

By contrast, my graduate school experience was phenomenal. Consistent feedback on my work was motivating and helpful. I enjoyed the smaller class sizes and challenging coursework. Professors across the GMU disciplines were informative, inspiring, and supportive. I was also able to begin mentoring students through my environmental organization, Water Health Educator (WHE). Faculty connections helped to shape my teaching methods as I consider how helpful it is for students to have detailed feedback on their assignments, particularly those that can be edited for improvement and regrading and outlets for trying what they are learning and demonstrating what they know. I also began to develop WHE so that it could provide online opportunities for internship and practicum students when an in-person position was not feasible, so I had to learn more about online engagement, website building, and social media tools. WHE is now an online education forum for middle school students through college level and a global knowledge-sharing platform on all issues pertaining to water.

In December 2012, I was contacted by the Department of Global and Community Health regarding teaching GCH 360: Health and Environment. By this time, I had mentored fifteen George Mason University students with WHE in a range of GMU departments. Site supervision and mentoring included among other things, developing a lesson plan for each student to include internship duties encompassing reading and writing of news articles, curriculum development and teaching environment-centric programs at the local libraries as well as an independent project. Some of these students were under the GCH undergraduate internships and the GCH graduate practicum, and I also was asked by other departments, including GLOA, GOVT, EVPP, PSYC, and ANTH to either prefect a student through their internship course or to develop a directed reading or field-based learning curriculum. I was truly driven by wanting to connect my students with opportunities that could shape their interests, add value to the education, enhance their resumes, and build their networks. Before Zoom, we were still lecturing by Skype or a K-12

school-based platform and learning very much on our feet. I also continue to mentor students today through WHE, as well as in the Bachelors of Arts in Integrative Studies, participate as the advisor of several student groups and conferences, and am a faculty Mentor for a Mason Impact Research Grant for Undergraduate Education for a GCH 380 student research group. I have also mentored a Fulbright Student, and I continue to offer career brainstorming and academic mentorship on an ongoing basis, particularly partnering with Academic Advising to support students with unique challenges and experiences to help ensure their success.

Creativity and innovation is something I am especially good at, and I am fortunate that my entire upbringing was about learning and trying new things. As both a military brat who moved around a lot and with physical mobility issues due to multiple orthopedic surgeries in my youth, I had to learn how to show up and participate in new spaces sometimes in an adaptive way, over and over again. One of the first things that students learn about me is that I try to approach our course with kindness, respect, and humor. I am certainly not a stand-up comedian, but I am pretty outgoing in the classroom (I was Senior Class Optimist in 1988, if anyone needs that highlight), and know how tired some of our college students can be as workers, family members, parents, caregivers, and often with a full course load. My teaching style seeks to *meet them where they are at* by being creative, welcoming, thought-provoking, and absolutely not linear. I recognize that there are different types of learners so my methods may include lectures, visuals, guests, *each-one-teach-one*, groups, partners, active learning, community outreach, mapping, graphics, research, writing or something else. For anyone who is struggling inside or outside of the classroom, I also make sure that my students know that I am accessible and approachable. When appropriate I may share that I had challenges coping in college and that I will do my best to pay attention if their work seems not *up to par*, if they are consistently absent or missing work, or if they seem particularly stressed or exhausted. The curriculum is important, but I also want to help build responsible, aware and empathetic adults. Especially for those moving on to careers in public health, they cannot learn to be conscious to the challenges of others if they do not feel valued themselves and if they are not encouraged to self-advocate and self-care.

The *COVID pivot* made online modality professors out of many of us, and learning how to take a course that was *only always* taught in person and recreate it for online learning was at first primarily about turning attendance into discussion boards and group projects into "get together on the side and do [abc]." Many of us became a little more creative with Zoom, using breakout sessions and polls, screen-sharing for presentations, exchanging some of those boards for blogs, and we invited guest speakers into our virtual classrooms. However, most of us thought that once we *reopened* that a good chunk of the distance learning would end yet quickly found out that many students prefer to stay in the online modality. Whether it is so that they can work more hours or live at home farther from campus, the *DL* is here to stay, so I have really been challenged with replicating the in-class experiences as best as possible so that the online learner does not "miss out" on an experience that may have once been *only available* in person. In fact, every couple of semesters I may teach two different sections of the same course, one in person and one online, and I compare and contrast the courses to be sure that they are receiving equitable experiences. I also collaborate with other instructors so that we may share ideas about how to make an in-person active-learning assignment like role playing, for example, work just as well online. Wanting to ensure that an online course is collaborate, interactive, and social, I have found ways to make breakout session community or flexible meetups work in the same way. We have also found "dupes" for in-person activities in online games or brainstorming using Jamboard.

During the early pandemic years, the study abroad that I advised also had to pivot to online, so we really had to be as creative and *techy* as possible so that the students felt that they were getting a quality "trip" from home. For this and my classroom community-based learning assignments, I have found ways for students to get active in their community while socially distancing and staying safe until we were authorized to engage in F2F volunteerism again. The GCH 360 (Health and Environment) community-

based learning activities for online learners are flexible so students can schedule them in their own time, from comparing neighborhood lighting to playground cleanup. For GCH 445 (Social Determinants of Health), students had a choice between sewing masks for low-income communities, working at no-contact food banks, creating cards and gifts for nursing homes, or tutoring K-12 students via Zoom. The goal was for students to see first-hand the needs of specific populations during the pandemic and how social determinants impact health outcomes. Through these experiential opportunities, students have engaged with praxis in topics from homelessness, aging, disability, disease and stigma to hunger. The feedback from the students, parents, community partners, and others has also been so heartfelt. My students and I often talk about how connected some of us felt during that time of rampant isolation. The lessons were many, so we continued these evolving community collaborations in every modality.

Most students quickly figure out that it is hard to fail my classes because I offer many opportunities to succeed in the course assignments as well as opportunities for related extra credit. That is not to be misconstrued to mean that any of my courses are easy, but I do allow students time to edit papers and projects, as I am also a firm believer that they can learn much more through editing or a *do over* than from simply receiving a C, D, or F. Students get to learn from their mistakes and I am specific in their learner feedback if I am looking for something else. This also helps to cement rules of good writing, critical thinking and analysis, proper citation, and learning how to *unpack* heavy material in their own words. Just as homeschooling offered my own children a chance to spend time on challenge areas rather than keep moving forward before they fully master a previous topic or concept, these similar methods have helped to guide my teaching such as utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy criteria to scaffold material and systematically check for understanding. I really emphasize *communication*, remarking that it directly correlates with the interpersonal skills and accountability that they will need in the workforce.

Another philosophy of teaching is that I can always learn more. I have taken graduate classes as a tuition benefit of being an adjunct faculty for the past few years, recently completing a graduate certificate in Women and Gender Studies as well as taking standalone courses that might enhance my teaching, such as LGBTQ challenges in education, topics in racism and marginalization, and issues in disability and gender. I enjoy sharing new material with my students, and I am purposeful in checking that my curriculum evolves and remains current especially in courses where offering outdated or *blinded* data will not suffice or lacks inclusivity. I have also had the privilege of working with undergraduate students as the faculty learning partner for three Alt-Break trips on HIV/AIDs and stigma in Washington, D.C. and Amsterdam, and I am gearing up for a sexual health and stigma study abroad in Germany and Netherlands next summer. I am also a huge fan of the Stearns Center, and I have taken advantage of the annual Innovations in Teaching and Learning conferences as presenter, volunteer or participant for many years. I have also participated in workshops and training opportunities to enhance my teaching. In addition, I was selected as a member (and then the co-chair) of the GMU Provost's Adjunct Faculty Committee where I worked together with fellow adjuncts, deans, and the Provost on matters important to university adjuncts. I am also currently the interim Adjunct Faculty Coordinator in the Department of Global and Community Health.

I hope that this glimpse into my own ethnography provides a visual introduction to my teaching pedagogy and the experiences that have helped to shape my classroom praxis and it has provided an abstract for my passion for knowledge sharing and creative instruction.