

Dr. Breea C. Willingham's Teaching Philosophy

My role as a teacher is to help students become independent critical thinkers and writers, and provide a learning atmosphere that encourages creativity and empowers students to become active participants in the learning process. I believe students learn best when the classroom is a collaborative and communal space that respects and honors their different identities and experiences. As such, I strive to create an inclusive learning community where students are encouraged to express themselves freely while critically engaging in the course content and with each other. That is why I sometimes arrange the desks in my class in a circle so students are dialoging *with* each other rather than *to* me. This student-centered approach also helps to develop an atmosphere of collegiality and acknowledges the equality of all students.

My goal as a teacher is to contribute to my students' intellectual growth by presenting a broad range of topics, information and materials. Learning is not one-dimensional and the knowledge of a variety of subjects is necessary for students to develop strong minds and become independent thinkers. I use a combination of teaching styles – e.g. lecturing, facilitating class discussions and group assignments – in my classes to reach students who have differing learning styles and preferences. I encourage students to question everything and not take ideas at face value so they can develop new perspectives on society and culture. I incorporate hands-on assignments that create opportunities for self-reflection and shared experiences.

For instance, in my *Women & Prison* course I collaborated with Joe Coyle, coordinator of a writing workshop at the Champaign County Juvenile Detention Center, on an assignment in which my students read and critiqued the poems and short stories written by his students. I asked my students to write their critiques as if they were speaking directly to the juveniles. I then forwarded their essays to Joe, who shared them with his writers. My students described this assignment as one of the most challenging because they did not know what to say to the young writers. They were especially moved by the stories Joe's students wrote because it gave them an up-close look at some of the issues juveniles experience in detention. One of Joe's students wrote back to my class and said: "Thank you very much for reading my poems and all my writing pieces. It means a lot to me to know that my writing is getting out there in the world and even making an impact on people." This assignment was important because it gave students an opportunity to learn about a part of the criminal justice system directly from the people experiencing it, a valuable lesson they would not get from a textbook. (Here is a link to a brief blog post Joe wrote about our collaboration: <http://mixituplis.wordpress.com/2014/01/04/jdc-writing-program-collaboration-with-suny-oneonta/>.)

I also use guest-speakers to bring course content to life. In my *Writings from Prison* course, students read the story of the spiritual transformation of Jerry Balone, a man convicted of murdering three people in Buffalo, New York, in 1973; he was paroled in 2007 after spending 37 ½ years in prison. Students questioned whether Jerry had truly been rehabilitated while incarcerated and if paroling him was the right thing to do. When I told students Jerry would be visiting class to share more of his story, some of them threatened to skip class that day because they did not want to meet a murderer. I challenged them to open their minds and listen to Jerry. Not only did they attend class, they were riveted by Jerry's story. In the reaction papers students wrote following Jerry's talk, they described how their preconceived notions about people in prison had changed because of his story. My goal here was to push the students to challenge their own biases about people in prison and realize that incarcerated people are people, too.

As an interdisciplinary scholar whose work intersects with academic conversations in criminology, criminal justice, sociology, race and ethnic studies, American studies and women and gender studies, my approach to teaching reflects a broad range of subject matter and teaching strategies. I use the prison system as an entry point to the study of race, gender, class, and justice. My interdisciplinary background places me in a perfect position to teach introductory courses in sociology and criminology, corrections, sociology of law, women in the criminal justice system, race, crime and justice, and courses that intersect with media studies.

I am also committed to improving my teaching skills and regularly seek feedback from students and colleagues. I use mid-semester student feedback and evaluations to measure my teaching effectiveness and whether my course objectives are being met. If they are not being met, I make the necessary adjustments. I have had other faculty members visit my classes to observe my teaching and offer constructive criticism. Whether the feedback is from students or colleagues, I use their suggestions to help me improve my teaching skills.

I believe my teaching philosophy and strategies coupled with my broad research interests and areas of expertise leave me ideally positioned to contribute meaningfully at any institution committed to academic rigor, creative exploration and intellectual, pedagogical and cultural diversity.