

Kevin Bell Teaching Philosophy: Purposes and Practices

When I worked as her teaching assistant, the most influential mentor I had in graduate study told me why, in her view, the same brilliant undergraduates kept taking new classes with her every semester they could. It was because, in her words, she had “never taught anyone anything.” She explained that what she really did in classes was to think and inquire openly into as many themes and sharp images animating the assigned text as she responsibly could—and to allow every student space and time to slowly identify with the movement and excitement of thought that she exemplified in every moment of classroom discussion.

In my own career-long identification with the power of her approach, I remain astonished to see so many of my own students realize, in their own times and rhythms, that in simply trying to respond to someone else’s constant questioning and opening of different angles to complex pieces of philosophy, literature or film, that they, the students, are actually teaching themselves how to lose whatever need they may have once had for pre-determined points of moralistic, “either/or” judgments and positions: and how to discern some of the ways that explorative literature and film induce us to grasp more sensitively the differences organizing our experiences of the world. Naturally their realization comes with another one—that in order to argue, question and write with skill, confidence and invention, one first has to be drawn toward the hours of reading, listening and preparation necessary for deep attunement to that artwork. In taking such responsibility for their own educations, my students tend to go further than that. They begin to discover that true scholarship of any kind is *all passion*, all of the time, especially during its periods of disorientation and struggle. They begin to realize that any true study of art is infinite. I have never stopped trying to guide them all to *guide me* back to the point of such self-discovery, through sustained immersion in a few ideas and images made endlessly available by any of the syllabized texts and films.

As I cannot expect students to take seriously the notion of critical study until they understand how seriously *I* take it, I try to do much more than communicate my own enthusiasm for such work. In each meeting of each course I lead, whether it concentrates on Black diasporic experimental cinema made since 1980, or on British literary modernism, students learn to model for and to demand from each other the kind of incessant *involvement* that I expect in any student’s verbal intervention, writing and listening. They train each other, in both guided discussion and in written peer responses on CANVAS, toward an always personal engagement with the artwork and with the reflective analysis it generates. This leads each individual to take interpretive risks, whether in private absorption of a classmate’s perspective or in public expression of one’s own. It’s an involvement that leads each student to try to contribute something that hasn’t yet been heard or perhaps even thought—an involvement that requires each student to be idiosyncratically-informed by the tonalities and textures of our art object. These class discussions see students forming their own senses of how deeply implicated they are personally in *any* narrative we read or film we view—beyond any question of whether they “like” that artwork or not—because each artwork on our syllabus alters how we perceive the situations animated by that work’s phrasings, sounds and images. The psychic labor demanded of any student to eventually sense the absolute uniqueness of any serious novel or film’s texture is the *same* labor that leaves each student a different being from whoever s/he or they were when they first sat down to read that novel or to watch that film.

This is why I have always designed my course exams to work as teaching instruments in themselves. I give each course two lengthy take-home examinations, during which students compose essays analyzing the major themes and figural patterns of any novel, short story or film they choose from the previous few weeks of the course. They have nearly a week to weave original arguments from the textual details of a single passage that I extract from the artwork they select. Each student makes creative use of those details in connecting the logics of the local passage to those of the larger narrative. My commentary on each student’s exam is copious, in both its running account of how the paper is assembling itself and in its final summary, which always invites the student to talk out the performance during office hours. Those students who confer with me usually force me into higher levels of precision in my explanation of how they might intensify their own perceptions of what they see, hear and read, in class and out.