

Jacob Juntunen's Teaching Philosophy

My classes, like my research, focus on theater's role in forming imagined communities, with an emphasis on marginalized populations. I build on textual analysis to demonstrate to my students that canonical texts are in conversation with one another. Additionally, I show that canons delineate who is part of national dialogues. By tracing change over time, my courses underscore the role of theatre in political transformation. The secondary texts I include emphasize to students the importance of critical conversations in changing cultural norms. With these goals in mind, I utilize classroom strategies to assure student-based learning environments that encourage active questioning.

Teaching students to ask intelligent questions is as important as informing them of facts. The ability to question allows for new learning, and, as a result, never loses applicability. Consequently, I open class by asking each student to briefly relate their questions about the reading. This method serves not only as an icebreaker, but also as a compass, because it gives me a sense of the students' points of entry into the texts. It may compel me to adjust my lesson plan accordingly. Likewise, if students are forced to articulate a portion of the reading that they don't understand, they implicitly express comprehension of other parts of the text. When class-size allows, I assign a student leader who guides a portion of the day's discussion. This assignment requires active questioning from the student-leader; it also forces the student-leader to think of open-ended questions extemporaneously rather than performing a rote presentation.

In order to demonstrate how art demarcates who is included in national imagined communities, it is important for students to understand the concept of a canon. Beyond its definition, students need to recognize how a canon comes into being and changes over time. While some of this knowledge comes from readings, I introduce the concept with an in-class game. I ask students to write down a play or book that they think everyone in the class will know, and one that they know but think no one else will. When they read the answers out loud, we create a "canon" for the class, while also finding outlier texts. We then discuss what our canon might mean. For instance, why is Shakespeare so familiar, while LBGTQ-authored texts are less so? By creating a list of mutually familiar titles, we create a specific canon for the class members, helping them see the concept as tangible rather than an abstraction.

To further stress how power structures change, I teach canonical plays out of their chronological order. Rather, I first choose a series of plays considered "canonical" pre-1980. These tend to be plays by white men. Then, around mid-term, we return to the past and read plays deemed canonical by current anthologies, highlighting the texts by women and minorities that were overlooked earlier. We discuss, based on anthology inclusion, when these scripts were "recovered," and I highlight scholarly movements that helped revise the canon. We also discuss the backlash against this more recent canon. By teaching several canons, and assigning the academic conversations around canonical change, my theatre history courses show students how dramatic texts are part of a system that can challenge power structures.

In all of my courses, my goal is to ensure that students understand how cultural production—such as theatre, film, literature, television, and scholarship—helps shape the nation in which we live. They may not all graduate to become theatre artists or scholars, but they will all leave my classroom with a better understanding of how our society functions.