

With a decade of teaching experience, I've taught courses in Performance Studies (performance theory, performance methods, and ethnography), Gender and Sexuality Studies (feminist, queer, and trans history and theory, emphasizing Black Feminism and queer of color critique), and Composition and Rhetoric (research writing, persuasive essay writing, creative non-fiction). Across public and private universities, community centers, an international high school program, and a youth prison, each of my courses are grounded in autoethnographic inquiry, queer and feminist of color theory, and connections to local community. In my class "Trash!," for example, students conducted ethnographic and archival research in field trips to the Northwestern Special Collections, the Leather Archives of Chicago, and a Village Thrift Discount store. They constructed final autoethnographic performances grounded in Black, queer, and feminist critiques of archives, identity, and performance. Across my diverse teaching experiences, I've learned that it is essential for students to explicitly name what they hope to accomplish in each specific class. I build responsive, caring, and intentional classrooms where students are prepared to meet these goals. To accomplish this, I challenge them with three main provocations: analyze your social positionality, articulate your goals, and realize your responsibility to yourself and your peers.

I begin this process by asking students to compose "learning contracts" in the form of personal letters to me in the first week of class. Here, they use their past successes as data to imagine their ideal course environments in relationship to their overlapping social identities. I then ask them to think about what practices they will need to develop to make that environment a possibility. In smaller seminars, I then meet with students individually to discuss these "contracts" and develop individual strategies for their work. I see this as only the first step to an ongoing process: these early exercises ask students to name their own experiences so that they can name their own goals in the context of understanding their responsibilities toward their peers.

With these learning contracts, students exercise agency over their learning. I revise my lesson plans to support these goals alongside course readings. For example, a Northwestern University student who described the burden of being one of the few Black women in each of her gender and sexualities classes used the "learning contract" exercise to think critically about emotional labor, situating her work along a genealogy of Black feminist praxis. Rather than fully rejecting this role in our class community, she developed new practices of drawing boundaries between peers' expectations for her behavior and her own intellectual inquiry. In our private conversations, I provided her more context about the theoretical structure of the course and its grounding in Black feminist thought. As with any time I introduce works by marginalized authors in class discussions, I asked students to name the rhetorical exigence and overlapping "discourse communities" of each writer rather than just seeing them as representatives of a specific minoritized group. During our conversation of Audre Lorde's "Uses of Anger," for instance, I situated Lorde's 1981 conference speech in the context of 1970s mainstream feminism and Black feminist and womanist writing. Instead of turning to one student as an authority on the universal and timeless experiences of Black women, students instead positioned Lorde as a timely theorist in generative conversation with other theorists and activists. The entire class—from different levels of experiential and theoretical knowledge—grew in their understandings of the critical contributions and histories of Black feminist thought, one of my key goals for the course.

We thus use these individual learning contracts to build classroom communities that remain specifically accountable to the students of each classroom. My syllabi for Gender and Sexuality Studies courses twine this autoethnographic inquiry with course texts that theorize identity and power. In daily low-stakes writing assignments, students use readings and discussions to reflect on the ways that identity and experience have already shaped the ways they can be present in the classroom. Especially for many students raised in primarily white cultural spaces, open and direct

communication in this form is often confused with rudeness or aggression. To combat this effect of white supremacy, I scaffold course time to discuss standards for open, honest, and critical feedback, co-authoring a set of feedback practices and shared values for the “course community.” I have situated this co-written work alongside coauthored work like the “Combahee River Collective Statement” or pamphlets from lesbian separatist communities. After these conversations, I update my syllabi with these co-written community standards, referring to them throughout the remainder of the course as I lead discussions and provide feedback to students. Here, I have gained much from Megan Boler’s notion of a “pedagogy of discomfort.” Instead of adhering to color- and class-blind academic standards, we use moments of conflict, misunderstanding, and even boredom to think critically about how our ideologies and affects are shaped by our social positionality, and then we work together to build our classroom with intention.

Such community-building work asks students to move beyond provisional feelings of comfort in the interest of creating more intentional and nurturing spaces of intellectual inquiry. After a class lecture on Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, a white student who was in the process of coming out as a lesbian visited my office hours. She felt she had a complete ignorance of basic terms about sex, gender, and sexuality and was frustrated by a theoretical text that she felt had nothing to do with learning more about herself. During our discussion about her learning contract, we agreed that she would volunteer to speak first during the following course session, beginning our discussion with these questions. As a result, the initially silent student practiced and modelled behavior I would hope for any student: She engaged with complex theories about sexual identity through honest inquiry, encouraging her peers to articulate their own understanding of the course materials with direct reference to the text, and she described this work explicitly when we co-authored our “course community” standards. In this case, while her social position as a white lesbian in a sexuality studies classroom may have provided her a provisional sense of safety in remaining silent, her commitment to understanding her own sexuality in the context of queer theory required her to take a more agentic stance in building an active class community.

As each new classroom is composed of students from diverse backgrounds with varying levels of social privilege and access to institutional knowledge, we build these communities with a deep attunement to their needs alongside sustained theoretical engagement in Black, queer, feminist, and trans theories of difference. Across my teaching evaluations, students have consistently written about my commitment to them as individuals alongside the high standards I set for their membership in this provisional community. As one student wrote, “the substance was maybe what brought us into this space—assignments on a syllabus, the flesh of academia—but the community is what Benjamin crafted, and what brought the content to life.” While I start each class by asking individual students to construct an optimistic narrative about what they hope to accomplish, I always end courses with an assessment of where we’ve come together. Students sit in small groups to gather their materials from the entire class. They amass hundreds of texts: emails, reading and discussions notes, dozens of daily low-stakes writing assignments, and major assignments. I ask them to map these on these board and they rarely have enough space. We gather for a group photo, surrounded by a textual representation of the breadth of theory they’ve encountered and the threads we’ve carried from the beginning of class to the final day. While students have been aware of the affective experience of deep self-examination and community-building, what often surprises them is how much they’ve already applied course discussions to other courses and experiences beyond our single class. I see this as evidence that they built the very spaces that they began to envision on their first day.