

Toya Mary Okonkwo

### Teaching Philosophy

*"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." – Bahá'í Writings*

I believe students are innately endowed with knowledge, creativity, and intelligence. What I offer them, within the context of my classroom, is a space to cultivate and broaden "treasures" that they already possess and tools to mine their own mind's gems and develop their individual talents. In this regard, I also encourage my students to be cognizant that my classroom is place for people who *want* to be there. I don't force anyone to share their thoughts or to answer questions because I think it is important for students to have ownership over what they contribute. Drawing on my experience with theatre, I value collaboration as a central focus of producing knowledge. I like to confer with my fellow educators on what is working well and what tips we can share to ease the tensions that are bound to arise over the life of a course. Training in theatre also helps with viewing teaching as a performance and thinking of the subject matter as lines to be learned. I taught middle school science, not because I was trained in the subject, but because I was dedicated to learning the biological and geographical processes well enough to have a convincing presence in my classrooms.

Although primarily educated in American systems, my racial and ethnic heritages are not the norm in the academy. Therefore, I see the need for crossways of diversity as a means of, sometimes uneasy, but hopefully fruitful change. I am dedicated to improving, through guided inquiry, any academic system that I become a part of. I believe global concerns should permeate all classrooms. Opening dialogues on how we benefit from implementing heterogeneous educational ideas and how our educational practices can benefit other systems is imperative for sensational development and sustainability. Having lived, studied, and traveled abroad, I see studying abroad as a means to facilitate our ability to become knowledge makers who embrace a global outlook to become better teachers. Presenting my research on shifting the dialogue to privilege the voice of Mary Prince in her slave narrative, at Harvard University's RCC's transatlantic conference, brought me into contact with global scholars from predominantly Spanish speaking countries. These scholars were interested in avenues of the humanities that intersect with social justice work on issues of racism, migration, and environment. My research efforts are dedicated to interdisciplinary approaches that showcase the importance of the humanities and arts within these real-world contexts. Social justice is a global concern. As a

university instructor, I want my classroom to encourage exploration of global communities that transcends a touristic interest. Many students may not have the resources to travel on their own, however, in today's interconnected world, it is paramount for educators to stimulate students to think about global solutions. I want to be a resource for them to make these connections, even if, initially, through digital means.

I've worked with international students in the Intensive English Language Institute at Midwestern State University and with students from refugee communities in Berlin and Bonn, Germany. On the second to last day of an English camp, where I worked with fifth and sixth graders, a particularly shy and generally reluctant to speak student wanted to show me before and after pictures of her home in Syria. Her uncle's store had been bombed. She felt comfortable sharing this part of her life with me because I had told them about my own difficulties of adjusting to life in a new country. Though under grossly different circumstances, our families were both dealing with German bureaucracy and immigration. We had a connection. Telling my own stories and showcasing my own humanity enhances my primary pedagogical practice of thinking of the classroom as symbiotic. Students teach me, just as I teach them. I believe teaching is about connecting and growing.