

Toya Mary Okonkwo

## Teaching Statement

No one is born into the periphery of their own life.

I find the world needs people who can bring together the connecting threads of acknowledging diversity as integral to achieving true unity. Luckily, this idea of diversity is culminated for me in my own existence; my mother is African-American and my father is Nigerian. As less than 2% of the professoriate are Black women, statistically, I may be the only Black female professor many of my college students ever encounter. While I don't remember when we lived in Umueri and were cast as "other" there because of our American-ness, I do know the sentiment of feeling a need to reconcile multiple cultures and experiences and being othered in the USA because of my Blackness, economic position, gender, and religion. Inclusion is key. Feeling like you can voice your own story and add to your heritage by listening to the voiced experiences of other people is beneficial for anyone who wants to truly engage in their work as a world citizen.

My pedagogy is steeped in the ideals of DEI - as I am interested in using rhetorical practices and ways of knowing that draw on cultures and understanding beyond a Westernized view of knowledge primarily based on empirical data. In researching Black girlhood topics, it becomes evident that the way to include people into the Academy is to change what "counts" as knowledge - instead of just extending the same strategies, which have for so long been used to exclude. This is why I rely on creative and interdisciplinary and altruistic strategies to conduct my research and inquiry into how the local becomes global and the personal becomes archetype. No one is born into the periphery of their own life. We must let our visions become world-embracing and recognize that each person is a valuable and worthy collaborator in their individual lives and thus in the building of communities and institutions that can be trusted to serve them.

*"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'u'lláh*

I believe students are innately endowed with the treasures of knowledge, creativity, and brilliance. What I offer, within the context of my classroom, is a space to cultivate and broaden "treasures" that they already possess - the tools to mine their own mind's gems and develop their individual talents. In this regard, I 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. This aspect of my pedagogy gives autonomy and respect for their needs and boundaries that may be changing in the course of the semester. To this end, I ask each class what my students have learned - a small exercise that gives time to reflect and begin to shift them to be more eager and engaged in becoming protagonists and active participants in the course of their lives. It also prepares them for the Final Essay assignment, "What Did You Learn," which is clearly explained as not just pertaining to the course material or agenda of our syllabus - I want to know any and everything that they learned in our time together - even if it was how to play a card game because of the group work or how to present a proposal to the campus librarian and get permission to start a Maker's Space with equipment she housed and no one had been using.

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Some of my most successful assignments have been the Student Philosophy, whereby they tell me why they are pursuing higher education and what is motivating them to complete their goals; the Writing/Literature History Letter, where they explain their personal experience with our subject matter and what they are most hoping to gain and build in our course. I've also found that doing a Commonplace Book with prompts that go beyond a written journal response, has been effective at getting students to engage more deeply with our readings. In my Writing courses, our journal assignment is to find examples in various types of media of the rhetorical concepts we are exploring. Notably, the Cultural Critique papers have vastly improved the way my students make connections of what we are learning in class to the greater world. It also gets them to go out and be audience members at lectures, art spectators, fans at a basketball game, participants in religious celebrations - all the while finding ways to connect it back to something we are learning about in our readings; thereby giving them a direct and immediate understanding of how what we do in a classroom has important effects beyond its confines.

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 fruitful change. I am dedicated to improving, through guided inquiry and radical imaginations of what an inclusive culture looks like, any academic system of which I become a part. I utilize Black womanist lines of inquiry to permeate my educational experience by looking at fantastic futures and alternate ways of knowing. Opening up 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 of a different academic culture. Having lived, studied, and traveled abroad, I see global concerns as a means to facilitate our ability to become knowledge makers who embrace a global outlook to become better teachers. My classrooms encourage exploration of global communities that transcends a touristic interest, while implementing and theorizing how our own local neighborhoods and communities are indeed "global" to most people on the planet. 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 local positionality and how that translates into a greater context, as we reach and design solutions to the structures of injustice. I am a resource for students to make these connections, even if, initially, through digital means.

I've worked with students who are all the first in their families to pursue higher education, with students who are in the racial minority at their university, international students in an Intensive English Language Institute, and students from refugee communities in Berlin and Bonn, Germany. On the second to last day of an English camp, a particularly shy and reluctant to engage 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 love, humility, faith, hope, and finding a democratic education.