

Like many of you, this is not my first time to a Sheedy Award ceremony. I've been in the audience as we have bestowed this award on several of our beloved colleagues in the past and I have been moved to see how fully they have embraced teaching as a vocation. I doubt, for example, that any of us who were there will forget Robert Sedlack's acceptance of this award a few years back, and all that it represented as he neared the end of his life. I've been thinking about my very first semester here, sitting in the audience and watching Richard Pierce accept this award and thinking that this is a place that takes teaching seriously and that rewards faculty who really care. This is all to say that I do not quite feel worthy to be in the company of those giants, but I am deeply moved to be on this side of the podium today to share some thoughts on my own life as a teacher.

### **The Prompt**

Winning the Sheedy award while away on sabbatical has had two pleasant side effects. First, I have been spared seeing my face plastered all over campus on the infamous Sheedy poster—at least until I arrived on campus yesterday. Second, it has allowed me to have a little extra time to reflect on what it means to be a teacher—and, in particular, to be a teacher at Notre Dame.

Recently, I asked our Associate Dean Margaret Meserve how I should approach this speech. In other, I words, I did the *most* Notre Dame thing possible and **asked for a prompt**. (Dean Mustillo told me earlier that at least I didn't ask for a rubric.) Turns out there isn't a prompt, but Margaret gently suggested that, at this point in the semester, no one wants to hear a lecture on how to teach, especially from someone who's on away sabbatical. "Keep it personal," Margaret said. This was good news, since—as I will soon explain—the personal is an essential element of my pedagogy. But that wasn't always the case. I want to spend my time today reflecting just a bit on how bringing myself more fully into the classroom has improved my pedagogy.

### **Why Not?**

I have been teaching American Studies' senior thesis class off and on for a six or seven years, and, last fall, I noticed how much the class has changed over that time. I started teaching

the class as a nuts and bolts research workshop, and spent time on things like the Chicago Manual of Style and how to cite sources. I still do that boring but necessary stuff, but I have come to realize that the students need much more than mechanics from the senior thesis class. When it comes down to it, they simply need to hear—and believe—that they have it in them to write a senior thesis.

One text that I have used time and again is Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, which has helped to keep me going as a writer since my dissertation days. Lamott is useful for undergrads because she's wickedly funny but also profound in her message that writing is a scary, wonderful, maddening, rewarding undertaking.

When I re-read Lamott every fall, there's one thing that always strikes me as relatable to my own teaching career. It's not one of her famously spiky but penetrating theories about the writer's life but the fact that she is constantly trying to convince herself to lower the stakes and lighten up. When Lamott is unmotivated or intimidated or feeling totally depressed about getting words on paper, she asks herself the simplest of questions: **Why not? That's it, those two simple words: Why not?** I am worried that this sounds trite, but we as researchers and teachers, sometimes take ourselves so seriously that we simply do not leave room for the element of surprise—we get so busy and focused on getting it right, fulfilling the prompt, that we forget to have fun, to experiment, or to try out new things.

Senior thesis writers do something similar: They imagine that their writing has to be perfect, that it has to resemble what they think a senior thesis should look like. I challenge them with "Why Not" quite a lot. "Why not just check out that archive and see if it has anything relevant to your project?" "Why not pick up the phone and ask that source some questions?" "Why not just by writing a page—just one page—and see what happens?"

One of the weirdest things about this profession is that teaching is typically 40% of your workload but, in grad school, most of us got very little to absolutely no pedagogical training. We are luckier than most because we have the Kaneb Center to help us in every stage of our career. But because a lot of us never really got trained as teachers, we must spend our days experimenting,

trying new things, and figuring it out along the way. It's that willingness to take risks that I really want to talk about, because when I reflect on my time here as a teacher these eleven years, that's really what comes to mind. It might surprise some that *Notre Dame*, where tradition reigns, is where I learned to be a bolder, more experimental teacher, but this university, and this college in particular, has given me the time and space to ask myself **why not** time and again.

In my very first semester of teaching, those golden days of having a course release and no gray hair in my beard, I taught a class called **Mixed Race America**. I was fresh out of graduate school and arrived on this campus with a certain image of what a Notre Dame professor would look like—and how they would teach. Looking back, I now cringe over I approached some of the course material. For example, one of the units that I meticulously prepared for the course was on the longstanding historical debates about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. I really wanted students to leave the course with a sense that sexual, romantic, and filial relations between different racialized populations is not some recent phenomenon in U.S. history but are *fundamental* to U.S. history—that, in fact, you can't understand Americanness without stories like that of Jefferson and Hemings.

But here's the thing: I held back. We dutifully unpacked Annette Gordon-Reed's masterful and definitive history, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, and, it being the fall of 2008, read and analyzed Barack Obama's memoir and then watched America elect him as its first mixed-race president. We all learned a lot, so I am not saying I was a bad teacher. What I am saying is that I wasn't doing what Black feminist scholar bell hooks calls "teaching with the whole body" in her book *Teaching to Transgress*. Hooks argues that a great teacher can't teach only with her head: she's got to bring her heart and soul and her own story into the classroom as well. I regret now that I never showed the students that my own interest in the subject matter was rooted in my own upbringing in a family whose history was mixed in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and language. That could have been an important place to start the course from, but I guess I wanted to embody the cool-headed and objective professor that I assumed students wanted.

I operated like this for a couple years, treating myself as if I were some dispassionate curator of student readings and a moderator of *their* conversations, but I slowly began to realize

that doing so meant that *I* was not fully in the classroom. Two things, in particular, bothered me: First, I was underestimating my own expertise and how it connected to my story. I had a mission and a message but was hiding behind an air of neutrality and objectivity. Second, I realized that I was not following my own advice and taking risks, putting myself out there, and just seeing what might happen if I were to teach from a place of honesty and transparency about my own personal and political investments in my academic work.

What I have done since then is simple. It hasn't required any additional training or seminars. I simply started to bring more of myself into the classroom, to tell students more of my own story and relationship to the subject matter.

I think a good example of this would be in 2016, when, late that year, the president elect made it clear that he intended to repeal the policy of Delayed Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA. I wrote an open letter to President Jenkins telling him about my grandfather's undocumented migration to the United States and how it guides my service to Notre Dame's undocumented students.

Honestly, it worried me about exposing so much of my family history to the campus and the public—and I talked over the matter with my parents, just as I talked over today's remarks with them. I can take no personal credit for the fact that Father Jenkins and the administration has taken a rather humane approach to the undocumented students on this campus, but to me it mattered to show students that faculty have investments in their success that go far beyond our intellectual pursuits. My family's history is a driving force in why I teach and research about U.S. perceptions of Latinos and Latin Americans, so ***why not*** admit that our story an important historical source for me?

Ok, I should admit here that my vision for teaching with your whole body—and your whole story—doesn't always revolve around the tragic histories of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the United States. To be fully honest, it has also meant sneaking my dog Dolly into the Main Building a few times when students and I could all use some extra comfort when discussing difficult topics.

What I am telling you goes against a lot of the teaching advice out there. When I got this job, the only advice my advisor gave me was to not be too available to students. His actual words were that I should “cultivate an air of mystery.” When I got this job, several people told me that I would have to hide any evidence of sexuality and avoid talking about race and other topics that might be distasteful to the proverbial “Katie from Chicago.” And it seems like academics on twitter have created a cottage industry on a thousand ways—and reasons—to say NO to students. I’ve done just the opposite of all of that advice.

For me the transformative thing has been finding ways to say YES to students, and developing a pedagogy that casts off the pretense of neutrality and dispassionate objectivity. Now, in the first session or two of all of my classes, I make it clear that I see the classroom as a place to not only explore, but also actively work against, racism, gender oppression, homophobia, and other systems of oppression. My voice might be failing me today, because of this cold, but when teaching I make a full-throated pronouncement that neutrality is not the goal of a course that is taught from an anti-racist, feminist, pro-GLBTQ-rights point of view.

Of course, it helps that I don’t believe that any research endeavor conducted by humans is ever neutral. For me, what has made the difference is having the guts to relay this to our undergraduate students who arrive at college thinking that every class will tell every side of every story. I teach a class called “Gay and Lesbian America” and, thank goodness I am no longer pretending to be neutral on the issue of whether homophobia is wrong or whether GLBT people deserve full human rights. Again, for me, it matters that students can bring their own stories into the classroom—which I do as well. There are lots of valid reasons why faculty members, especially those from marginalized populations, might choose to *not* to reveal much about themselves to their students, and there are certainly times when I choose to hold back, but teaching from a place that recognizes the personal as political has made a big difference in my life.

I think it’s important to note, especially for the assistant professors in the room, that my course evaluations got *better* when I started bringing more of myself into the classroom. All of the accusations that I was not neutral disappeared when I started telling students up front that an

“objective” study of racial disparities or gender and sexual oppression is not only not in my wheelhouse, it’s not even possible.



Recently, I started asking myself “why not?” on a larger scale. In January, through Notre Dame International’s Insider Project and some funding from the Dean’s Office, along with a lot of logistical help from Juan, I was able to take five students on a journey through Colombia exploring that country’s recent history from the war on drugs to the peace process. I was inspired by our colleague Jaimie Bleck, who had taken students to Mali the prior year and whom I suspect will be accepting this award in the near future

The Colombia project yielded some unexpected benefits. Serving in a soup kitchen for Venezuelan migrants in Cali and engaging in narcotourism in Medellín alongside the students helped me understand the book that I am writing in an entirely new light. Sure, part of the trip involved me screaming into a phone at Airbnb customer service...on the streets of Medellín...in the rain...at midnight, but it also meant forming a temporary but loving family with the students, and gave me the chance to model for them that the life of the mind could take them to some unexpected places.

Far and away, the aspect of the trip I am proudest of is the fact that it inspired one of our students, Irla Atanda, to return to Cali to conduct interviews with Venezuelan migrant families. Irla is an American Studies major with a minor in International Development and represents, to me, the best of an Arts and Letters Education: She is deeply curious, highly motivated, and is not out to rescue anybody but wants to make the world a better place. In seeing the connections she has made with several migrants in Cali, and one family in particular, I can tell that she is researching with her whole body. Her research is quite different than my own current work on the cultural history of the War on Drugs, but spending time with Irla in Cali last summer and hearing about the ups and downs of her research reminded me why I entered this profession in the first place.

## **Conclusion:**

None of what I have said here is a prescription. I really think the best thing about this weird and wonderful profession is that there is a lot of wiggle room to find what works for you in the classroom. We are lucky to work in a college that still believes in the value of a liberal arts education and encourages its faculty members to teach with their whole bodies. If I did have any parting wisdom to share, it would probably be that you get to decide what that means for you, but I stand before you as someone who has benefitted in innumerable ways by asking myself “why not?” and from bringing my whole self more fully into the classroom. Many of you in the room have been my first responders when things haven’t worked or I have felt disillusioned with teaching—and that makes it all the sweeter that you are here to celebrate with me on this day that means so much to my family and me.

When I was growing up in East Chicago, Notre Dame might have only been about 70 miles down the toll road, but, culturally and economically, it felt like it was on a different planet. I am proud to have made a home here—and to work alongside so many devoted colleagues who strive to make this place more welcoming to students with backgrounds like my own.

There is so much more I could say about what that means to me—and I would, but I know that the famous December-Faculty-Meeting open bar is waiting. **I will simply say, again, from the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU. It’s good to be home.**