

## 2009-2010 Seminar Participants

### "Exploring the Teaching and Learning of Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing"

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#### *Rationale:*

Seventeen years ago, I was a first-year graduate student teaching assistant pushed in front of an undergraduate Marxism seminar. I was thoroughly disoriented, and then astonished at the realization that nobody was available or interested in teaching me how to be a teacher. I stumbled through that class, and many after during my career as a graduate student, on instinct and earnest attempts to channel my own favorite teachers. I have worked hard to improve my classroom skills since then, but I have never lost the sense of how strange it is that while graduate school thoroughly trained me to be a researcher, I was never trained to do the most important thing we do at a liberal arts college: teach. And though I now have tenure and many semesters behind me, I still yearn for a forum and the time to focus specifically on my teaching.

While I teach a variety of subjects, I understand my role in most of my classes primarily as someone who helps students learn how to think critically. As I tell students on many of my syllabi:

...what we read together will be in some sense less important than how we read; we will learn how to ask meaningful questions of texts, even when the texts themselves seem obvious or "easy." This means that from the outset we will be questioning our basic assumptions about what it means to read closely...

That said, I realize too frequently that I am not always as successful as I'd like to be in this endeavor. I love to talk and read about teaching. I often seek out colleagues, both inside and outside of Stonehill, to discuss pedagogical issues, and during the summer I often read books about teaching: in the past couple of years, for instance, I've read Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* and Stephen Brookfield's *The Skillful Teacher*. But while these conversations and texts have been useful, sometimes extremely so, I also recognize that, for the most part, I am still working mostly on instinct and trial and error.

#### *Project Description:*

I would prize the opportunity to have a more grounded understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning, especially the teaching and learning of critical thinking and writing, to develop the solid foundation and reference point that graduate school should have provided. The Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar seems an ideal place both to develop such a grounding, and also to have a regular, ongoing, dedicated, thoughtful conversations about teaching.

I have persistent questions about my teaching, questions I carry with me to every class, concerning how best to help students arrive at the place I'd like them to be. I would love to have a forum within which to read, discuss, and share ideas, and learn from my colleagues. I'm interested in using weekly readings

and discussions in the seminar as a way to explore pedagogical issues concerning critical engagement with classroom material and with students' own minds: how, for instance, do scholars of teaching and learning understand critical thinking in the classroom? What are the central debates of this discussion? At the same time of course, I'm interested in such discussions on a very practical level, bringing them to the central concern I have in my teaching endeavors: how can I help my student think critically?

My hope is that in the TLSS our theoretical and our practical discussions will inform one another, and help me with ongoing classroom conundrums. For instance, I have often felt that student presentations are both a crucial aspect to each of my classes, and also a great burden on the classes. As a general principle, I love the idea of students taking responsibility for what happens in the classroom. But more often than not, despite trying a variety of such presentation models, I find that these fall short of my expectations. Similarly, I'm interested in exploring how to work with online forums to greater effect: I have tried a variety of these, including weekly student-initiated blogs, professor-initiated student responses, and wikis, but I still don't feel like I understand how to make this technology most useful to me and to my students. For these reasons, I am excited and eager about the possibility of participating in a Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar, and I have no doubt that such a theoretical and practical grounding will benefit my work in the classroom immensely.

#### *Community Outreach Plans:*

I would be delighted to have the opportunity to share my experiences in the TLSS with the faculty, and continue to be part of the faculty-wide discussion of teaching and learning, in teaching round-tables or academic development days to come.