

Lusie Cuskey Teaching Statement

In my classroom, I position myself as a co-adventurer on the quest to engage theatre's potential for posing meaningful questions and cultivating space in which to explore their answers as a diverse, dimensional community. The questions we explore in theatre – how worth is calculated, how to weather adversity, how to determine and assert identity, what it means to be human – are particularly relevant to undergraduate students developing their identities as humans alongside their expertise in their areas of study. Theatre distills big ideas into human forms, allowing students the opportunity to engage, interrogate, and (through performance) embody worldviews and lived experiences outside their own.

As a result, the theatre classroom is a space to learn to have respectful conversations about how we (as artists *and* people) interact with identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, and class both in the rehearsal and board rooms of our institutions and in the content we put on their stages. It is important to me to have a classroom in which diverse voices (and bodies and thoughts) are championed as accurate reflections of the world in which we live or want to live, not Othered guests at our otherwise homogenous table. This has applications for the readings and examples I choose for classes, but also for the way I teach in the room itself. In my acting classes, for example, I invite students to teach the class articulation exercises and perform solo improvisation activities in their first languages (whether English or otherwise) in order to allow all students the same experience of performing expertise and living fully in truthful imaginary circumstances. In class discussions, I anticipate where texts are likely to provoke strong feelings around issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion and build in class time for those conversations; those discussions are not a distraction from class, but essential to it.

My efforts to center diversity, equity, and inclusion allow me to model values that are essential to being an effective artist: being self-reflexive and open to critique and constantly, consciously seeking growth. I seek out training opportunities that allow me to be a more informed, culturally competent artist-educator and bring what I learn back to my rehearsals and classrooms, sharing my learning with my students; I expect everyone, including myself, to do their best to honor diverse identities, and it's vital to model that doing so requires a willingness to learn. I invite student feedback regularly in both communal and anonymous formats and respond to it without defensiveness, making changes as appropriate or expanding on my reasoning for my decisions. Defensiveness and shame are antithetical to robust intellectual and artistic practices, and it is my goal that everyone in the spaces I lead can learn to let them go as we move forward together.

I work to equip students in both theoretical and practical courses with the tools to balance their contemporary perspective with a historically informed understanding of a given piece of art's sociocultural context. As an artist-educator, I believe that theory and practice – particularly in the arts – do not operate in isolation, but must mutually construct, challenge, and support each other. Both the practical and theoretical courses I teach engage students in developing an appreciation for this reciprocal relationship. Scholars who are able to engage historical and theoretical content with empathetic intellect become artists with the ability to translate big concepts into the fleshy specificity of the human experience required for effective art. Similarly, artists who have practiced taking on new challenges with bravery and a sense of play have the resilience to encounter unfamiliar ideas – particularly those ideas with uncomfortable implications about systems of power and individuals' relationships to them – with the spirit of openness and curiosity necessary to creating spaces for conversation and change.

Practically, this means that my theoretical courses (like history or script analysis courses) ask students to interact with materials in creative and embodied ways in addition to more conventional modes of reading, writing, and discussion. I provide students with opportunities to engage course content as scholar-artists with their own previous knowledge, interests, and lived experience, drawing direct parallels between what they are learning in class and their professional ambitions. In Contemporary Queer Theatre (an upper-level special topics course I created at the University of Kansas), for example, students ended the semester by coming together in groups to pitch a summer season for a queer theatre company that engaged their practices as actors, directors, designers, playwrights, and dramaturgs while demonstrating their newfound knowledge of post-Stonewall queer theatre in the United States. This pitch

seeking funding for their company combined the skills of evidence-based argumentation they developed in unit essays throughout the course with the kinds of collaborative theatre-making abilities they would need to really create a theatre company of their own.

In practice-based courses, I invest time in making sure students understand their artistic work within a broader context, informing them not only about contemporary conventions and trends in the business but also the theories behind them. My priority is to help students develop skills in the course topic that allow them to create dynamic, engaging work through an artistic practice that is physically and emotionally sustainable. I create spaces for students to play hard and fail safely through the cultivation of supportive ensemble environments that reward risk-taking and offer constructive criticism thoughtfully through a version of Liz Lerman's critical response method. I also ensure that students have the tools to work respectfully outside of class, training each of my classes in current theatrical intimacy best practices. In these classes, in which students are asked to be vulnerable and to connect honestly and intentionally with others in front of an audience, it only seems fair that I model the same; when students are progressing and doing interesting or exciting work, I use my genuine delight in their progress as a pedagogical tool for encouragement. Students' end of semester evaluations consistently register surprise at their own growth throughout the term, and several of my students have gone on to declare theatre majors or minors, been consistently cast in department and community productions, and seek (and obtain) summer theatre work.

Delight ultimately forms the basis of my teaching practice. I have worked professionally as an actor, director, teaching artist, stage manager, and technician because I think every aspect of theatre is fascinating. I continue to seek training in diverse theatrical methodologies because I want to understand and experience as much of this art form as possible. I want to share that with my students – I want them to feel the hugeness of being a part of an art form that connects them to people who lived thousands of years ago, to people across the world, and to people in the seats right next to them. I want them to understand how words on a page or bodies moving through space (like the words they are asked to write in nearly every class, like the bodies in which they live) can spark lasting change in the world around them. I also want them to know that, in a stage in life that can be overwhelming and discouraging, they have a professor who is on their side; they have a story and, as someone who studies stories for a living, I assure them that it is worth telling.