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**Thinking in Public: A Statement of Teaching Philosophy**

John Rakestraw, a professor of philosophy at Georgetown, where I received my Ph.D., once told a story that forever changed the way I think about what I do in the classroom. As the anecdote goes, he told one of his students that he didn't have a television in his home. The student frowned, confused.

"But what do you do at night?" the student asked.

"I read," Rakestraw answered. "And write. And sometimes, I sit and think."

The student looked bewildered. "You just sit? And think?"

"Yes."

A long pause. Then: "Do you think I could come watch you do that, sometime?"

In this digital age, facts can be found in an instant. What used to take several class periods to understand, or a trip to the library and its volumes of encyclopedias to find, can now be pulled up with the press of a thumb and a quick, "Siri, what is universal grammar?" Then the student can read the Wikipedia article, put the primary sources on hold at the library, and perhaps even view a video of Chomsky himself explaining the theory right from their phone. Certainly, as a teacher, I can put my own spin on what the students find, but it is true that the basics can be attained in an instant, and often from the primary author him or herself. In some ways, this seems a shock to the system: if it's not my job to impart the facts, then what is it I do?

I believe that answer is, "I think in public."

I lecture little. At home, my students do a comfortable level of reading, which I carefully select for clarity of explanation of the tools I want them to use in class, and the completion of which I assess via its integration into other class activities and assessments. My classes are whenever possible, centered on data the students have brought in themselves. I ask them for examples, rather than provide them—it is a rare day that I leave my classroom having not learned something new. Thus when I model the way I would analyze a set of data, I am often not using data I've analyzed before—it means I show students exactly how to think through fresh data. Sometimes, like any researcher presenting in real-time, I make mistakes in my own thinking, and I encourage my students to work with me in figuring those out.

I view my students as junior scholars, less experienced at but no less capable than any professor of their own research and inquiries. Although the knowledge of linguistics is just as specialized as any other social science discipline, the fact that we all use language every day means that the concepts are readily accessible to the layperson, if they are just shown how to think about them differently. Therefore, I structure my courses so that we are constantly building a toolbox of analytical tools, then using them in real time.

I create safety for failure. When a teacher encourages her students to try things on their own, it is incumbent upon her to make sure that mistakes are truly an option—one can't simply say, "It's okay to fail" but then make each assignment worth a grade-damaging percentage of the final grade. My assignments are varied and many, so that students have many opportunities to try their hands at the work, and a difficult quiz or poorly written-up dataset can stand in its rightful place as a learning opportunity rather than a semester-ending bad grade.

I teach personally. When I can, I focus on the students' own work, their anecdotes, the way this knowledge relates to their lives. Language is a lens through which my students can interpret their world, and it's made most easily accessible when they are using their own experiences to learn about it. I learn names quickly so that my classroom can be a free-flowing exchange of ideas. I incorporate their experiences into my class, and I share my experiences with them. We laugh and we

talk over one another, and everyone jumps in with insights when they can. It's loud, and it's messy—but that's what good thinking looks and sounds like.

With our changing relationship to information, the primary function of the twenty-first century college educator is to impart the ways of thinking. What to think about, certainly, but also how one goes about thinking about it. More than ever, we are moving to a model akin to that discussed by Parker Palmer in his book *The Courage to Teach*, where knowledge is not some sacred fount of which the instructor serves as conduit, but rather where knowledge is the hot pot we all access communally, and the instructor challenges students to find new ways to interpret the knowledge we all can reach.

Twenty years down the line, my students may never remember the names of William Labov or Alan Bell. But what I hope they take from my class is a way of thinking; of not accepting that common view that the way we communicate is uniform and immutable. For that reason, I view my role as chief public thinker, giving my students the tools they need to better analyze their world.

Unlike Professor Rakestraw, I have a very nice television, and so may never have a conversation like his with any of my students. But I know what my answer to that fictional student's question would be. "Yes. You may come watch me think whenever you'd like—these are the days and times when I'll be teaching."