In my "Statement on Teaching," submitted in fall 2009 as part of my application for Continuing Employee status, I wrote that teaching for me is a political act that begins at the periphery of the traditional model of education and quickly gravitates toward less hierarchical, more expansive forms of learning. In the two years since not much has changed.

Deconstructing the classroom, for example, continues to be an effective way of getting students involved in what they learn and how they learn it. I do some lecturing, but the day-to-day business of the class is organized around student-centered activities, partnerships and small group workshops. Students discover fairly quickly that the classroom is a safe, but not always comfortable, environment. Modifying the instructor/student hierarchy allows students to do most of their work in more intimate, less intimidating circles of three or four groupmates, peers with whom they can share insights and concerns. In practice this work includes screening the films, taking notes, identifying important details and ideas and organizing a thoughtful, reasonable response. Along the way, students are introduced to a variety of techniques and strategies that are intended to help them shape their prose, from writing introductory paragraphs to developing a consistent argument. What complicates this redistribution of authority is that it also tasks students with thinking through difficult, often challenging visual material. An analysis of slavery-as-entertainment in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (00) or corporate greed in James Cameron’s *Avatar* (09) requires that we shine a light on our own feelings about race and economic inequality, not always an easy discussion for first-year students.

Students in my sections continue to write on film (narrative cinema), which has a particularly strong influence on their sense of identity and place, on their politics, and on their collective imaginations. They live in a world dominated by television and movies and YouTube and video games, and by the time they enter UCSC they consider themselves fairly savvy readers
of the visual culture. It’s a good start. Unlike the passive viewer, however, what we want to try
to do as writers is slow the process by which we consume these visuals down. When a young
William Wordsworth first sees London, he describes it as a “phantasma / Monstrous in color,
motion, shape, sight, sound!” (7:687-88 The Prelude), and then spends the next two hundred
lines carefully cataloguing everything around him. Like Wordsworth, students in Writing 2 are
taught to begin with what they see. to read the visual text closely, detail by detail, frame by
frame, studying the simplest motif much like one studies words in a paragraph. In this way close
reading and good note taking not only help to generate information that can be used to support a
claim, but several options for structuring an argument, such as “foreground / middle ground /
background.” In class we talk about these initial stages of process writing as a journey of
discovery in which the writer becomes “conscious” of what she sees on screen and how she
might fashion an appropriate response to it.

But some things have changed.

I am always looking for ways to make the material relevant, engaging and challenging.
While I continue to work with film, the films themselves change every other quarter or so, along
with the readings and writing assignments. Two years ago I revised the syllabus in order to shift
the focus of study from film form to film genre (the musical, horror and western film), partly as a
way of introducing students to the history of cinema. Knowing that the musical’s primary goal is
to bring about a “marriage of values” (Altman “American Film Musical” 79), for example, gives
students a broader understanding of the classical Hollywood romance and why it is ripe for
parody in films like Singing in the Rain (Kelly / Donen 52). Of course genre denotes an
ideological dimension as well, and students are genuinely intrigued when they discover that
Western films, which consistently characterize westward expansion as the struggle of courageous white men to civilize a savage land, bear very little resemblance to actual American history.

More examples of student writing have been added to the Reader, including a four-paragraph draft and a research paper with a paragraph-by-paragraph commentary typed in the margins. Several different versions of the handout students complete as part of an editing workshop (“Working With Drafts”) have been collated into a single assignment that integrates all six evaluative areas of concern – purpose, development, organization, use of sources, sentence variety & conventions. And, beginning last year, students were asked to complete a “Draft Cover Sheet” for each writing assignment; here the writer responds to a series of questions about the draft she has just produced. It’s a strategy that has worked well with Core students but that, for some reason, I’d gotten away from in Writing 2.

So two years later some of the things I do as a teacher have changed, while my approach to teaching remains pretty much the same. Ultimately, the purpose of deconstructing the classroom and of constantly revising and rethinking the materials is to underscore the idea that learning is not a passive act. First-year students in an introductory writing class must understand that they are not only learning how to write well, but how to learn. If a student simply regurgitates what an instructor tells her, she’s not really engaging with the issue so much as she’s learning to consume information passively, plodding mindlessly into darkness like one of Fritz Lang’s robotic workers (Metropolis 1927).

Successful teaching isn’t just about training students to write grammatically correct sentences. It’s about getting them to think for themselves. and what could be more political than that?

BK Faunce
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