

Cyrus R. K. Patell
Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Honors
Department of English
New York University

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

My goals as a teacher have always been to make my students understand why I feel passionate about literary study and scholarship, to help them explore the contours of the discipline and its modes of thinking, and to awaken within them a sense of the pleasures and rewards of intellectual life.

What I want my undergraduate students to take away from my courses is not so much the memory of any particular text or piece of analysis, but rather a fuller appreciation for the value and, indeed, the joys of the life of the mind. I want them to realize why reading and thinking about literature should become an abiding part of their lives, and I want to give them the tools that will make their future reading experiences rich and rewarding, in college and beyond.

In my graduate teaching, I have sought to instill a professional approach to literary study, while also making my students understand that their training should help them engage more fully with the world, rather than remove them from it. Above all, I want my graduate students to understand the power and responsibilities that they themselves will have as teachers.

Over the past fourteen years at NYU, my undergraduate courses have included seminars on “Literature and Ethnicity,” “Aesthetics, Politics, and Canons,” and “Postcolonialism.” I regularly teach the department’s required American Literature survey, “American Literature I: From the Beginnings to the Civil War,” which begins with Native American creation stories and ends with the sinking of the Pequod in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. This course is taught in the lecture-section format, and my duties include supervising and mentoring the graduate students who serve as section-leaders. With the aid of a grant from NYU’s Curricular Development Challenge Fund, I was able to add web-based components to American Literature I in the days before NYU adopted Blackboard. I have continued to seek pedagogical innovations that serve the course’s central goals of introducing students to the sweep of American literary history before the Civil War and nurturing their ability to make arguments about literary texts, both orally and on paper. As the course developed over time, I began to make significant use of audio and visual materials to enhance students’ engagement with the course materials. I also offered students the opportunity, in lieu of a final paper, to create a web-based hypertext based on one of the works from the syllabus. This project gives students hands-on experience in conducting literary research, while enabling them to develop deeper insight into the nature of literary intertextuality.

In 2003, I had the opportunity to build on the expertise I had gained during the previous ten years as a lecturer and course supervisor by developing a new course that reflected

my interests in interdisciplinary scholarship and scholarly collaboration. Entitled *Writing New York*, and taught jointly by Professor Bryan Waterman and me, the course immediately became the largest lecture course offered by the English Department. Interdisciplinary in its approach to literary and cultural studies, the course examines the evolution of New York City as a literary construct as well as the city's emergence and continual reinvention as one of the country's – and the world's – premier sites of literary and cultural production. Beginning with the earliest New York theaters in the eighteenth century and continuing to the present, the course covers a range of drama, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, film, and other forms of visual representation that reveals a variety of New York experiences. Students learn about the city's cultural history; chart the development of literary forms in American literature from the late eighteenth century to the present; examine the ways in which writing about New York contributed to American literary history as we commonly conceive it today; think about the relationship between literature and other artistic forms and media; and explore the nature of interdisciplinary work in the humanities. To reinforce the idea that literature is connected to other artistic forms and academic disciplines, each course lecture makes significant use of multimedia in the form of video clips, Power Point presentations, and audio clips. The course uses Blackboard to provide supplementary materials, to foster discussion of topics outside the classroom, and to alert students to resources and special exhibitions available to them elsewhere in the city. Team-teaching is a crucial part of the course's culture: it provides an object lesson in the ways that learning can be enriched through a diversity of perspectives, through discussion and dialogue, and through collaboration.

Writing New York has served as a pilot for a new kind of English Department course, an intermediate-level elective designed to foster intellectual exchanges between majors and non-majors, to introduce non-majors to the discipline of literary study, and to encourage majors to think about the relation between literature and other forms and disciplines. I am currently developing a similar course on transatlantic modernism with my colleague Patrick Deer, which will be offered in Spring 2009. Other offerings that use *Writing New York* as a model include an introduction to postcolonial studies and a course on contemporary British literature and culture.

Most recently, I have developed a new lecture course, a version of the course *Conversations of the West*, which is a required course for first-year students in the College of Arts and Science. The course typically presents texts from the Classical and Biblical traditions during its first half and then seeks to understand how these texts proved influential to writers from some later period (medieval, renaissance, eighteenth century, or nineteenth century). My version of the course decenters some of the premises of the course by reading Zoroastrianism as a precursor to both the Classical and Biblical traditions and by using a single novel – Melville's *Moby-Dick* – to stand in for the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. The class uses *Moby-Dick* as a prism to understand the earlier traditions, to see how those traditions both inspired and provoked Melville to resistance. By seeking to understand how one writer could make use of his Biblical and Classical inheritance, the course asks students to think about the uses that they can make of these traditions as well. I approach the older texts not as a classicist might but as a twenty-first century cultural critic, arguing (with the aid of readings by

Kwame Anthony Appiah and George Lakoff) that these are living traditions that continue to shape contemporary culture.

In 2001, I strengthened my commitment to undergraduate education by taking on two administrative positions. My wife and I became Faculty Fellows-in-Residence at University Hall, responsible for the creation of programming that bridges undergraduate academic life and residential life. We enjoy working with students outside of the classroom, and we have just begun our third three-year term as Faculty Fellows. From 2001 to 2004, I also served as the Director of Undergraduate Studies for the English Department. In addition to the normal administrative duties that accompany the job (which are heavy due to the fact that we have nearly 600 majors), my work as DUGS has included a number of new initiatives: rebuilding our department's undergraduate advising system, expanding its honors program, implementing a set of advanced seminars, developing intermediate elective courses on the model of *Writing New York*, assisting in the revitalization of our program in Dramatic Literature, overseeing the reorganization of the undergraduate creative writing program, and – perhaps most daunting – bringing about a cultural shift in our department toward an emphasis on undergraduate education. The task of refocusing our department's energies on undergraduate education was challenging, but it was made considerably easier than it might have been by our undergraduate students themselves, whose ever-increasing excellence and admirable intellectual curiosity makes them a joy to teach. I continue to serve as the department's Director of Undergraduate Honors, which enables me to work with some of our best juniors and seniors as they plan and execute their senior theses.

Although my graduate teaching during my term as DUGS was limited to one summer course during each of the past two years, I have continued to work extensively with graduate students while serving as DUGS, through the supervision of doctoral dissertations, the mentoring of my teaching assistants, and serving as both overall supervisor and pedagogical resource for all of our graduate instructors. During my early years at NYU, I worked hard to impress on our graduate students the need to engage with the profession outside of the walls of NYU, through participation in scholarly conferences and through the submission of work to journals, crucial aspects of a graduate literary education that were not sufficiently emphasized by our graduate program at that time. As Placement Director, I emphasized the need for doctoral students to conceive of their scholarship and their teaching as crucially interrelated projects, asking them to be able to convey to interviewers why their version of the standard survey course in their field would be unique because it was refracted through the prism of their particular scholarly interests and methods. As the head of our required American Literature survey course and then of a section of *Conversations of the West*, I have sought to provide more than simply a positive model for lecturing and professorial conduct: my graduate assistants and I meet regularly to discuss all aspects of teaching a lecture course, including initial conception, syllabus construction, lecture content and style, grading of papers and examinations, and above all the formulation of their own pedagogical philosophies. My teaching assistants are each asked to deliver one of the course's lectures, giving them the immediate opportunity to put into practice the pedagogical ideas we have been developing as a teaching staff. Even when I repeat a lecture course (and

there was a time when I taught *American Literature I* for several consecutive semesters), the experience is always fresh for me, because each time I work with a different set of teaching assistants. Each group of TAs puts its own distinctive stamp on the course, so that the course is never quite the same from semester to semester.

I have recently realized my ambition of reducing the number of my doctoral supervisions to the low single digits, down from a high of twenty-one in the mid-1990s. Twenty-three of my doctoral students have graduated since 1996, along with two whose dissertations I co-directed. One more is scheduled to defend in mid-September. Fifteen of my doctoral students have graduated since 1998, with nine going on to tenure-track jobs and one now serving as the director of the Cullman Center at the New York Public Library. Nothing is more satisfying to me as a professor than to watch a student become a colleague and peer. It's always a great moment when a former student achieves tenure, a milestone that two of my former students have reached, with three more expected to join their ranks at the end of this academic year.

2004; revised August 2007