

Statement of Teaching Philosophy – Michael Rodrigue-Barnes

"Aloha Spirit is the coordination of mind and heart within each person. It brings each person to the self. Each person must think and emotive good feelings to others."

I am a first-generation student who experienced housing insecurity twice and took eight years to complete an Associate's degree. That timeline isn't a badge of shame—it's a reflection of the structural inequities many students face and a testament to the resilience that I carry through each phase of my academic journey. From community college to doctoral study, a handful of mentors believed in and motivated me to press on. Their impact is a core influence of my pedagogical commitment to cultivate classrooms of belonging led by intentional mentorship; a classroom where knowledge is co-created across a diversity of life experiences that are honored, celebrated, and leveraged as tools to not only understand theory, but to *see themselves* in it. To me, teaching is not the simple passing of knowledge; it is the transformation of thought into palatable, actionable, and inspiring ways of being. I practice teaching with an ethic of physical, intellectual, and spirited presence.

I learned the ethic of physical presence during critical turning points in my academic journey, as a ninth year sophomore communication student and graphic design professional at Cal Poly Humboldt. The second time I experienced housing insecurity, I was mentored by faculty and peers within the campus community. People like Chate Catt-Nesser, who I collaborated with to form a club and community nonprofit called the Student Housing Advocate Alliance (SHAA), demonstrated leadership by simply showing up. We made sense of course content across disciplines while hiding away and smoking cigarettes, over mirror-work sessions in the library, or by hosting dialogues on campus. Chate was my comrade and mentor in becoming an advocate. She, along with a few instructors, taught me that mentorship and teaching happen within and outside of the classroom. Accordingly, as the advisor of the Performing Arts Club at Hocking College, I draw on our experiences to mentor students informally and help build knowledge through collaborating with the broader campus community.

By observing and collaborating with students, I grow to understand how students come together to learn with more depth and gain insight into how I can better instruct and mentor students in their chosen spaces of belonging. Additionally, An ethic of physical presence means that teaching and mentorship, for me, go beyond an office hour policy or the performance of expertise in a room full of "novice communicators". They are an ethic of physical and contextual presence. I meet students where they are, whether that is casual saunter to our next class, virtual meetings on the weekend or in line for public transit, my guidance is adaptable and shaped by relational entry points within and outside of class. In creating low-stakes environments like these, I open an avenue to connect across cultural barriers and negative experiences in academia. I model inclusive and proactive mentorship because I was never the student to go to office hours nor reach out to tutors, especially at the start of my higher learning.

An ethic of presence also means being the catalyst that bridges deeper understanding. I was not the student that understood concepts like "panopticism" or "concretive control" the first few times I read about them. The texts themselves did not change, rather it was a mentor asking the right question: "Do you wait for the light to cross even on an empty street?" or a simple phrase I

turned to song lyrics like, “Real power is controlling you when you’re not being watched.” An ethic of presence is being a part of an inspiring moment and celebrating that understanding. As an instructor, I strive to create moments that make students feel as though they are speaking theory, not trying to understand it. Much like my Public Address professor once said: “WOW Michael, I don’t know if I have ever heard or read a better definition of neoliberalism! I have never thought to explain it that way.” I push my students to learn *and* teach me. I push my students to *grow* not just as communicators but as whole human beings.

I became more aware of my need to be intellectually present in my first-year teaching at Ohio University when I started leaning into engaged learning over lecturing. A pivotal point that I sought to grow is illustrated by an evaluator in their observation: “You did a good job of connecting the activity to the course concepts for them, but you can also ask them questions so they can make the connections themselves.” Since then, I have strived to learn from my students’ expertise, resilience, and pursuit of belonging. To accomplish this, they must show me they have grown as a whole human being. While there may be some curricular elements that fall outside of my direct control, I am nonetheless responsible for the activities, discussions, and interactions that foster growth for the individual and everyone within our classroom community. I utilize critically reflexive dialogic and artistic engagement, including visual and narrative storytelling, as ways of making sense of the course content in low stakes exercises where students demonstrate holistic growth by engaging. A critically reflexive and present community is designed to inspire students to do work that they and their institution are proud they pushed to complete. Mastery, to me, is cultivated by through participation, thoughtful contribution, and critical understanding of course material. My goal in assessing students is never simply a number of points; it is the sum of growth I see in the individual which includes their confidence, complexity of understanding, and connection with course subjects. In other words, my students must also embody an ethic of presence in thought, heart, and time.

Teaching is equally the practice of aloha spirit and offering genuine support through an ethic of presence physically and intellectually. It happens in the pursuit of dialogue, not debate, and treating each other with civility and dignity even when we disagree. If teaching was simply passing words along, it would be just another commodity that can be devalued. Teaching is coming together, inspiring each other, growing together across classed, raced, gendered, abled, and aging boundaries.