

## Kevin McColley: Teaching Philosophy

If I were to boil my teaching philosophy down to a set of general principles, I'd end up with a philosophy that the NEA has called "Active Engagement," a pedagogy that emphasizes getting students out of their seats as often as the subject matter allows. In my experience, students engage with material more directly and enthusiastically, and they retain it more effectively, if I as a teacher present it to them in ways that engage them intellectually, physically, and communally all at the same time, and that is what Active Engagement pedagogy attempts to do.

There's always a gap between a pedagogy and its praxis, but I do what I can. At some point in a semester—usually right after the first paper in a composition class or the first short story or poem in a creative writing class—the need for instruction in using specific detail arises, so I have everyone in the class write down directions to wherever the nearest coffee kiosk is on campus. I then take one set of those directions and, without revealing which student had written it, lead the class on a trek across campus, following those directions *exactly* as they are written. This has left me tangling with security personnel in buildings or offices where I'm not allowed to go and, when I taught on a campus next to a lake, once wading out into the water. I've had to walk through water fountains. I sometimes suffer all day from squeaky shoes and clammy socks, but my students then understand exactly what I mean by writing specifically.

I turn writing concisely into a gameshow in which contestants get a point for each time they can make a wordy sentence more concise without altering its meaning; the winner gets a new car (a three dollar Hot Wheels). I teach the importance of primary sources by having my

students reenact Lizzie Borden's trial for murder, with students playing the roles of Lizzie, her murdered parents, eye-witnesses, secondary witnesses, policemen, and jailers. I take the role of the district attorney, presenting a series of cases with increasingly solid evidence, eventually resulting in a conviction by the student jury.

Not everything works every time, but enough works enough of the time for me to feel that Active Engagement pedagogy has some merit: my students are always engaged with the material, they succeed in understanding it, they enjoy the class, and their comprehension shines through in their written work. When I do fail I often end up looking like a fool, but even that has its merits, since it leaves me coming across as an actual human being and not an unapproachable intellectual demigod or automaton standing remotely, austere, and untouchable in front of the class. Some students don't initially engage with my approach to teaching, but that reticence has always evaporated after the first class or two, and indications of the success of methods include observers of my classes always remarking on the high levels of both engagement and comprehension by my students, as well as the quality of relationships I have both with students in my current classes and with many of my students years and campuses away.