

# THOMAS CONNER, Ph.D.

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## Teaching philosophy

My chief goal as a teacher is to prepare students not only to understand the world but to act within it — to claim their own place, contribute, and affect positive social change. On the first day of my classes, I advise students to “be mindful of the wide and wonderful world in which we live, particularly how the university education you’ve signed up for offers a microcosm of it for you to sample safely.” This is delivered in the context of my insistence that everyone respect the diversity of their fellow classmates, but it points to significant responsibilities on either side of the symbiotic relationship. For their part, students must seize the opportunities available to them in order to determine what their unique contributions might look like and how to maximize them — to “see the change they want to be.” But I am responsible for crafting and even hacking those opportunities into existence — managing that microcosm so that every student might not be mere spectators but might make that move from *seeing* their place in the world to *seizing* it.

My pedagogy has evolved over more than a quarter-century of experience in a variety of roles at a variety of institutions, during which I have fashioned an outlook on teaching based on inclusive methods and considerable social responsibility. I endeavor to foster teaching experiences that focus on three specific methods: a metacognitive approach, student-centered design, and an inclusive environment for all.

### *A metacognitive approach*

My classes are designed to include consistent opportunities not only to learn the required concepts but to be reflexive about the learning process. It’s a tactic I learned through actual practice and also via the evidence-based training I took advantage of at UC San Diego (a 2017 certificate in Teaching & Learning at the College Level). For instance, after writing assignments I have students complete a short worksheet in which they reflect on and express what worked or fell short about the freshly delivered assignment, what challenged them the most, and what they’ll do differently next time. The resulting document is mildly useful to *me* — providing a between-the-lines reading of student performance, as well as a good way to catch any discrepancies between my own evaluations and how they think they’re doing — but massively useful to *them* in terms of concretizing thinking and cementing conscious awareness of skill levels and course objectives. Reflections like this also have proven to be valuable punctuations in the course schedule, offering closure to assignments that feels more self-satisfying than merely awaiting the external pronouncement of my grade. It’s been a crucial extra layer to the classroom experience that I’ve incorporated into other courses in different ways, including what I call shorter “Stop, Reflect, & Write” breaks in my Communication courses.

### *Student-centered teaching*

In the superlative *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, the authors observe that “if [students’] initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts” and simply focus on the final exam or project, returning to their preconceptions after the class is

finished.<sup>1</sup> One method I've found useful in addressing, integrating, and challenging such preconceptions is to structure classes and learning modules to allow students consistent responsibility for outcomes — their own and those of others — whenever feasible. This means a lot of student-led presentations and discussions, peer-review work, even some say or flexibility in overall course design. For instance, in my Media & Pop Culture course, students eventually take the reins and lead a few weeks of classes, after submitting and voting on topics they wanted to see added to the syllabus (and explaining how these topics will advance our core course concepts). A simpler exercise that's proven useful in a variety of course contexts is what I call the Q&A of the Day: students are assigned one day during the term in which they must initiate class discussion by posing a single question related to the day's topics and proffering their own argumentative answer. Student-led instruction must be stringently and subtly monitored (and I'm not claiming to have mastered it thus far), but its rewards can be superlative.

### ***Maintaining inclusive environments***

As detailed in my separate statement on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, I prioritize creating classrooms in which all students feel respected and empowered to contribute. From the outset (in syllabi and amid classroom discussions), I make clear the roles of instructor *and* students in the crafting and ongoing maintenance of a supportive environment. I establish clear guidelines for respectful dialogue to ensure that all voices are heard and valued, explaining that a diversity of expression not only benefits social harmony but broadens and enriches their very education. In designing courses, I prioritize and center the contributions of scholars from underrepresented backgrounds in the readings and viewing materials. Understanding that students have varied learning needs, I use multiple instructional methods and offer flexibility in assessments wherever possible. By providing students with different ways to engage with the material and demonstrate their knowledge, I strive to create equitable opportunities for success.

These drivers of my teaching — reflexivity, responsibility, and inclusive strategies — fuel my own efforts to contribute to society by leading and guiding students to go forth into it and actively *engage*. Buoyed by my own privileged secondary and undergraduate education, I pursued a journalism career after being inspired by a maxim from Hunter S. Thompson: “That’s the main thing about journalism: it allows you to keep learning and get paid for it.”<sup>2</sup> Steering that career into features journalism and arts criticism, I reveled in popular culture’s highly accessible opportunities to initiate public dialogues about social discourses — dialogues often richer than those sparked in the news columns. When teaching communication and media, I find similar common ground on which to engage dialogue, particularly once students realize how much they already know about communicating and using media. Once they recognize that they have a considerable stake in the world around them, as well as formidable skills in navigating it that are surfaced through the coursework, their view of that world tends to open — as does a desire to write their own name onto it.

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<sup>1</sup> National Research Council, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>2</sup> O’Rourke, P.J., “Interview with Hunter S. Thompson,” *Rolling Stone* (Nov. 5-Dec. 10, 1987), 230-232.