

Natalia Piland - Teaching Statement

My goal as a teacher is to facilitate students' empowerment. As humans, students have the tools to discover and know their surroundings, to listen to each other, and to take action for the type of world they want. As a teacher, my responsibility is to respond to student needs, fill gaps in knowledge, and hold space for the entire process. The design and content of my courses use the physical classroom as a setting in which students can bring their whole lives and histories inside, while extending the discussion past the academy walls. This objective and approach stem from my own experience as a Latina who has moved multiple times in both Peru and the United States. Each time, I was faced with the choice to either disengage from my surroundings to prevent attachment and hurt, or deep dive into the new space by forming links to the people and environment around me. I learned that the second, while much more vulnerable, also provides the knowledge and power to change the world more readily than the first. Thus my ethic of civic engagement and self-determination: everyone should have the power to decide what their life looks like. However, that power needs to be responsibly and intentionally shared and created. The classroom is where we learn to collaboratively define our values and understand what type of knowledge we need to enact our visions of the world together. As such, my teaching style has developed around principles of mutual respect, self-discovery, and participation in action.

Mutual respect must be cultivated and nurtured—it cannot arise in classrooms accidentally because of the power the instructor structurally holds over the student. I want my students to know that the course is *for them* and that we are all learning from each other. For this reason, I find co-creation activities (a skill gained in my facilitation experience in the nonprofit sector before grad school) and pre- and post-course surveys indispensable. For example, in my current role as a teaching assistant and facilitator, I am redesigning the University of Chicago Darwin Senior Ethics graduate course. The pre-course survey I developed addresses some of the concerns of past students: in Beginning Ethics, which is taken with all other biology graduate students, most of the scenarios discussed concern biomedical ethics. Through the pre-course survey, students can have direct input on the content. Based on this input, we are now designing a course that is more related to students' work: animal welfare, fieldwork, and how to best communicate our science to the public. I assess the conversations between my students and I through these different activities, culminating in an evaluation of students' ability to participate in the classroom.

In my ornithology fieldwork, I prioritize working with and learning from local community members as a practice of mutual respect, bringing the values and skills of teaching to fieldwork. On the one hand, there is the cultivation of ownership in the project by the rest of the field team. On the other, there are the relationships you maintain to do the work with people in their property and space. In the relationships with the field team, I actively look for ways to connect my dissertation work to their own ideas: the blood samples we collected one year were shared between me and one of the undergrads who wanted to investigate avian malaria. Another time, one of my colleagues and I worked on online R tutorials when we were not mist-netting, translating them from English to Spanish. In long-term relationships with community members, I make an effort to visit the permit offices, the landowners, and the residents with reports on what we have found and photos for use in their own materials. Their children sit with us as we discover the different parts of a bird.

Connecting discipline content to topics that have direct consequences on students' work is one way to motivate students. However, I push those boundaries past the experience of students' work to their lived experiences. Multiple assignments that incorporate self-reflection are spread out in courses I design. The content that I present is tailored to the students' identity, because students deserve to see themselves represented in the fields they study. My commitment to visibilizing the fact that disciplines have existed and currently exist outside of what is considered "canon" manifests in the *Lady Lit Book Club*. The [Lady Lit Book Club](#), a blog I co-founded in 2014, reviews literary work by women and encourages the formation of two-person book clubs as a place to be vulnerable in discussing others' experiences. Friends, acquaintances, and

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strangers have written us saying that they feel closer to the people they're reading with and are reading books they would've never picked up on their own. These empathetic experiences are the ones I promote in my classroom. I want the work of people who have not been historically recognized in the natural sciences to be part of the introductory courses—not just special interest class or the last week of coursework. I see my career in academia as a way in which this work can be done: in a vision of a natural history course, I expand its canon with contemporary Native naturalists (such as Robin Wall Kimmerer), thinkers with disabilities (like Temple Grandin), and a variety of natural history and environmental media coming out of the Global South (such as *The Embrace of the Serpent*), having students connect to the work in pairs and introspective writing.

The conditions for participation in a classroom and in society are directly linked to the process of discovering one's self in a discipline while enacting mutual respect with colleagues. A co-created code of conduct held up through the duration of the course sets the standards for respectful discussion. Through organizing, I learned the importance of one-on-one meetings in creating relationships that empower a person to better participate in larger groups, and these, too, are built into the structure of my classes with projects that require discussion in office hours and peer review. Most importantly, I design activities that mimic processes that happen outside of academia so that students can experience these and form their stances within them before leaving the university. For example, in one discussion section I led, I created a role-playing exercise around a town hall for re-designing Jackson Park, a park near the University of Chicago campus. The role-playing enhances empathy for different interests and fears of stakeholders, the town hall takes on the structure of a space outside of academia, and the topic, Jackson Park, places it within the students' geographical context. These activities are evaluated on the basis of how students integrate topics explored throughout the course (in this example, identifying the value of nature for different stakeholders and its effect on the ecology) and their ability to ground it in action oriented ways (here, the act of voting in the mock town hall).

This role-playing activity also familiarizes a space outside the classroom so that students feel less intimidated in attending events that connect them to the wider community. The disaffected way in which institutions can treat their surroundings create the impression of an "ivory tower" or of a "bubble." Yet, higher education institutions are a powerful force wherever they are. Universities shape the students that go on to become decision-makers, teachers, researchers, and managers in the institutions that run our communities. The impression that in the Academy we are apart from the larger society is a false one, and one that we are responsible in dispelling. Instead of separating my students further, I mimic extra-academic spaces to actively break down the psychological barriers that keep students from engaging with the community and creating a shared vision of home.

As a student at the Bronx High School of Science, I went to a talk by environmental psychologist Dr. John Frasier on how physical space allows for a person's imagination to envision new ways to interact with it: The mere presence of bike racks open up the possibility of biking where it was not an option before. There were no bike racks at my school and I wanted to change that. I wrote a letter to my principal who rejected my request due to budgetary constraints. Distraught, I went to my AP Government teacher, Mr. Victor Greez, who talked me through the institutions in charge of the space around us. I reached out to the New York City Department of Transportation and within six months we had bike racks. Students started biking to school from each borough—one student even from Coney Island, Brooklyn!—saving their families private school bus expenses, minimizing air pollution, and getting exercise all at the same time. As a high schooler, this was the kind of world I wanted. The combination of providing novel ideas to students (like Dr. Frasier), guiding students to understand the actors that determine those possibilities (like Mr. Greez), and providing space for proactive independent thought (like Bronx Science gave me) exemplify what I strive for in my classroom. My classroom is a safe place for a variety of students to dream, understand, and enact, and I'm the scaffolding.