About a month into my first semester of teaching a first-year writing course at Marquette University, I was surprised to find that something did not feel right. I loved planning and conducting class sessions, my two classes of undergraduates were excellent groups of students – good-natured, willing to participate, capable of working well together or individually – and class periods seemed to be going well, but something was still not quite right. Then, during a lesson on rhetorical analysis, I realized what it was that bothered me: my students did not seem to be invested in the subject matter. I found myself questioning: how do I help my students recognize the value of the work that we do in our course?

This desire to increase student engagement with the content and concepts of our course ultimately led me to researching and pursuing a version of Ignatian pedagogy, a pedagogy that centers around the five elements of experience, reflection, action, evaluation, and contextual awareness. Ignatian pedagogy is connected to the Jesuit tradition, and so seemed an appropriate model to investigate as an instructor at Marquette University, a Jesuit institution. Although I am not Catholic, I find the holistic focus of Ignatian pedagogy appeals to me both as a means of improving student engagement in my course and as a way to emphasize the value of each student as an individual. Using a modified approach to Ignatian pedagogy, I try to structure my teaching around providing my students opportunities for learning through experience, reflection, and action, encouraging an awareness of the cultural and individual contexts that shape different worldviews, and inviting students to evaluate their own development as learners.

In terms of practical teaching experience, Marquette’s first-year writing course is the only university-level course that I have taught so far, but this class has provided a variety of valuable teaching experiences for me. As a general education requirement, the first-year writing course offers me the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of undergraduate students. My students include individuals pursuing degrees ranging from engineering to accounting, from criminal justice to journalism, and from exercise physiology to elementary education, and who have a variety of learning styles, extracurricular interests, global heritages, and personal experiences. Part of the challenge and the joy of learning to work in this diverse class has been attempting to bring such dissimilar individuals into collaboration with each other and myself. My goals for this class are not only that my students would better understand the uses of rhetoric in the world and write more effectively in a variety of contexts, but more importantly that my students would develop their abilities to think critically about the messages that they create and receive, to understand how to learn from and with others in a university setting, and to be challenged to invest themselves deeply in their intellectual work.

Since I recognize that in any group of individuals there will always be a variety of learning styles and habits, I attempt to provide a wide range of learning experiences for my students. In all of the learning experiences that happen in my classroom, however, I try to ensure that students have the opportunity to actively engage with the content and concepts of our course. This varies from brief, reflective freewrites, to discussions in pairs or groups, or times during lectures for students to respond and question. One of the most engaging class periods so far has been a class-long “writing forum” in which I moderated an open discussion of students’ perspectives on writing, a discussion that gave rise to conversations on the ethics of personal essays, grammar use in social media, and various composition strategies. A very different, but no less exciting, day involved a highly
structured small-group activity, in which, phase by phase, students in small groups developed proposal arguments for a hypothetical scenario.

To try to ensure my teaching methods are effective, however, I not only continually reflect on my teaching strategies myself, but I invite students to evaluate their experiences in the class as well. In addition to the university-wide course evaluations, I offer two anonymous surveys to students – one early in the semester and one late – in order to seek out feedback on how they learn best in our class. In response to the feedback, I have adjusted my teaching practices accordingly, such as using certain techniques more or less frequently, or modifying how I use a certain teaching practice. Of course, I try to be attentive to students’ responses in each class period, and have often adjusted lesson plans when they did not seem to fully comprehend the course content.

Whether teaching first-year writing or teaching a literature course that connects more directly to my primary research interests of eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, I believe teaching is an incredibly valuable and rewarding experience. As an instructor, I have an opportunity that few are privileged to experience: that of daily encouraging and challenging individuals to more fully achieve their intellectual potential. As an English instructor, I have the added joy of working with a subject matter that lends itself so well to both the marketable skills that students seem to desire, such as conducting research, developing argumentation skills, and writing fluently in a variety of genres, as well as the more abstract values of greater self-knowledge, cultural awareness, and critical thinking.

I realize that I am still a very new teacher, and that I have much to learn through the broadening of my teaching experiences. However, as I move forward in this career path, remaining open to new insights and pedagogical influences, my goal is to keep several of the values that I already have. Throughout my career as a university instructor – a career that I hope will be life-long – I will always care about my students as individuals, individuals who deserve to have meaningful, engaging courses and the encouragement of a committed educator. But I also never want to lose sight of myself as a teacher-scholar, one who balances the cares and responsibility of teaching with the valuable and intellectually satisfying pursuit of research. One of the greatest benefits of academia is that it creates an environment in which such a hybrid identity is possible, a world in which I can both help develop new scholars, while still being a scholar myself. It is by being engaged in scholarship and being invested in my own continual learning, that I believe I will be the best educator I can be for my students.