

Asher Tobin Chodos Statement of Teaching Experience

I have taught many academic music courses, ranging from large lecture hall surveys to core seminars for majors and applied courses in theory and performance. I have often received emails from students asking me to approve their thesis statements. Without any of the actual argumentation that would be needed to validate a given thesis, I never really know how to respond. The real work of logical argumentation, after all, is in substantiating a thesis, not just stating it; theses on their own are nothing more than assertions that are possibly true and possibly false.

Students send me these deracinated claims in states of intense anxiety. Deadlines are approaching, coursework is mounting, and they crave assurance that time invested in a writing assignment will not be wasted. I get the sense that my students regard writing as an enigmatic form of academic work subject to a teacher's personal whims. It must seem to students that the only way to guard against this unpredictability is to get the teacher on the record as having approved ahead of time.

In my opinion, this attitude misrepresents the actual process of research and argumentation. A thesis statement is, above all, an author's answer to a question. That question has to be of genuine interest to the author, and he or she has to spend considerable time exploring it freely before any kind of thesis can take shape. It makes sense that students would want to make sure their theses are done correctly, but intellectual curiosity – and generous amounts of time to indulge it – is the true prerequisites for legitimate academic work.

The culture of academic deliverables in which today's undergraduates have been raised militates against this kind of thinking. Nobody has the time to go to the library just to see where a given question leads, nor would most students even recognize that activity as legitimately productive. It is a core principle of my teaching philosophy that this is exactly what academic research should look like. As a teacher I do everything I can to get my students to see that academic work means getting sincerely interested in something, learning about it, and effectively communicating what you've learned to other people. If done correctly, it should be really fun. Music, because it is so inherently enjoyable, is uniquely positioned to help restore pleasure to its rightful place in academic inquiry.

This can be a hard lesson to get across, because it requires students to look inward for intellectual validation rather than to some putatively objective external rubric. Sincerity and curiosity are the first requirements for academic success, much more important than diligence or "intelligence." It is one of the virtues of humanistic inquiry, in fact, that it lays plain the ways in which emotional maturity and intellectual rigor go together; students who really do the work of taking a deep breath and trying to figure out what they really care about will grow both as thinkers and people.

This kind of growth is a primary goal of mine as a teacher. I think that it makes my courses rewarding for my students beyond what they learn about music, and imbues my classroom with warmth and good humor.