An Example

Instead of starting with a statement of general principles, I'd like to begin with an example of how I would teach a specific text. *Waiting for Godot* is often taught to undergraduates, and it is too often treated as an unrelatable play which is important mainly because of its unlikely popularity and success. I find *Godot* to be an excellent text to teach to undergraduates because it serves as an economical entryway into a discussion of postmodernism. *Godot* is perfect because it is essentially the same text twice — the two acts of *Godot* (in which, it has been famously said, “nothing happens – twice”) make it perfect to teach over two class periods (a full week in a Tuesday-Thursday class). I like having my students read the first act of *Godot* with only a brief biographical knowledge of the circumstances surrounding its creation. I usually urge them not to search the internet for easy answers to the play, stressing the importance of individualized response. On the first day of discussion, I begin by allowing the class to vent their feelings about the play. These feelings, usually of intense frustration or bewilderment, lead into a discussion of how Beckett elicits this reaction from his audience. Eventually I lead them toward a discussion of postmodernism.

The topic of the postmodern is not that foreign to students. I begin the discussion with Beckett’s formulation about the “ideal core of the onion,” as each attempt to achieve something (meeting with Godot, in this case) is another layer peeled from an infinite onion (which students invariably connect with *Shrek*). Beckett’s point is that there is no center to the onion, that every gesture we make toward knowledge or truth is essentially another layer removed on the road to nowhere, which is a graspable and teachable idea, especially coming after their frustrating experience of reading the first half of *Godot*. This leads to a larger discussion of the postmodern, in which I introduce other aspects of postmodern writing. In the past, I have discussed *The Matrix* as a contemporary staging of this movement, as the protagonist continually strives toward some central knowledge that constantly eludes him and us.

I begin the second class with a viewing of “The Chinese Restaurant” episode of *Seinfeld*, in which the characters spend the entire episode waiting for a table at a Chinese restaurant. I have also used a clip from *Pulp Fiction*, another reference point for many students. I then ask students to connect the characters to the ones from *Godot*, usually making lists of characteristics on the board. Sometimes, depending on the skill level of the class, I will introduce some important concepts of Derrida, Foucault, and other poststructuralist thinkers. Derrida’s discussion of the signification process is quite similar to Beckett’s ideal onion, and this marks an easy transition between the literature and theory, showing students that the dense theoretical writings are not too far removed from Beckett (for whom, at this point, they hopefully have a growing affection).

Only Connect

For me – and the cliché is intentional – teaching is all about connecting. Students often complain that literature, even contemporary literature, seems utterly foreign, and I combat this line of thought by constantly connecting the texts with the mundane experiences of our lives. When I think back to my most rewarding classroom experiences as a student, they all involve moments of connection and teachers who were capable of drawing those moments out of their students. Giving our students the desire and the knowledge to experience these moments, and fostering their ability to find connections and insights within the texts that they consume, is what I consider to be my most important job as a teacher of literature.

The literature courses that I design typically involve attempts to draw connections between texts, and I structure them around those connections (rather than chronologically). I love reading
texts in conjunction with other texts, forcing students to draw links between seemingly disparate sources. For example, in a unit on personal experience in narrative, we read Elie Wiesel's *Night* in conjunction with several David Sedaris essays. Looking for common ground between the two authors forces students to see beyond the horror and tragedy of the concentration camps and focus on the eyewitness perspective that Wiesel shares with Sedaris; furthermore, it allows us to ask questions about the methods that each author employs to achieve a desired effect. I also enjoy incorporating alternative media into the class; in the past I have used films, TV shows, and music to complement readings. I've found that students are better equipped to analyze television and film because they are more familiar with these media, consequently, I like to start with the familiar and then, after the students have built some confidence, move into the literature.

In the composition classroom, I am equally concerned with luring students into connecting with the writing projects. As a teacher of writing, my most important job is to give students the skills to present their ideas clearly through attention to style and sentence structure, a solid framework, and insightful evidence. I assign prompts that, especially early in the semester, allow students to work within relatively comfortable settings. I often accomplish this through a connection with popular culture, introducing them to the concept of analysis by forcing them to analyze a text with which they are already familiar. Often the most mundane texts (such as reality shows, pop songs, and advertisements) provide the best fodder for analysis by first-year composition students, as they allow students to make their own connections between what we discuss in class and what they experience in their lives outside of the classroom. My work at Georgia Tech has also given me a lot of amazing experience incorporating technology into my classroom, and I feel comfortable instructing students in using technology to present their information in different ways and to different audiences. I also feel passionately about moving beyond simply viewing composition in terms of writing; instead, I teach it as a variety of types of communication, including visual, oral, and electronic.

Research and Teaching

The other way in which connection plays a role in my outlook on teaching is in my desire to connect my teaching to my own research. I love the challenge of revising and refreshing my courses as often as I can to coincide with what I am reading or researching outside of class, and I love the complementary perspective that teaching gives me on my own work. I often construct assignments connected to my own research, using classroom discussions to spark new ideas and to test out my ideas. For example, I have been working on an essay about U2's problematic use of irony in the 90s. To complement my research on the problem of irony for people who do not understand it, I created a unit on the problems of irony, first teaching students to find and read irony. We went on to discuss texts where irony became problematic because it was improperly read, such as in U2's PopMart tour, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, and TV shows like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*. More recently, I have taught courses on James Joyce, rock music, and postmodern literature; as I explain in my cover letter, the connections here run deep into my research agenda and have produced wonderful results.

I really do believe that connection is vital – both connecting with my students and my research – to remaining an enthusiastic and interested participant in the classroom. In the future, I plan to continue finding ways to make my jobs as scholar and teacher feed off of one another.