F Sharp: Practical Techniques for the Classroom

The techniques offered in this workshop rely on two factors: the strength of the teacher and the strength of the material. The stronger both areas are the more successful the techniques will be.

The philosophy behind these techniques is that there are “no mistakes on the bandstand.” The bandstand, like the classroom, is a sacred space. You are trying to create something together. Listen and respond—don’t ignore or play over each other. When someone says or does something off key, respond to that note immediately when you hear it. You may sense it coming. When you do, trust those feelings. Over time you’ll get a feeling for what material, or what configuration of students, assignments and teachers are bound to elicit a forest of funk. Stay on your toes, listen and respond.

Can You Point To It With Your Finger?

I sometimes lead with this, and sometimes I follow (a statement). No matter when you use it, hit it hard. Ask the student who spoke: Can you point to it with your finger? This highlights the goal of your discussion: to move beyond opinions into analysis (critical thinking and argument). You are the immovable object, don’t let anyone move on until they can arrive at something they can point to with their finger. A real finger, not a metaphoric one. For challenging materials, or classes, I sometimes assign them to come to class prepared to discuss something from the text that they can point to with their fingers. Is this annoying? Yes. For everyone? For the students especially. The ridiculousness of the technique also helps ease the necessary tension required of challenging assumptions and pushing everyone to think beyond themselves.

Stinky Word (list)

Oh that stinks? Can you smell it? What does that smell like? Oh, that goes on the stinky word list. That doesn't mean you can’t use it, it just means it smells. If that was the odor you were going for, then you better work it. If you weren’t going for that, well, you may want to reconsider your language. Stank is not bad, it's just fragrant. So you need to be aware of the environment you're creating (in this class, in your intellectual work). You can go really crazy with this (depending on your style). The point is to force them to think about the language they are using, and the assumptions they are making. Unlike pointing to it with your finger, this technique moves quickly from the student who dealt it, to the entire class that smelt it. Calling attention to the layers, meaning, consequences, and implications of certain words helps you move immediately to analysis of the idea, and away from personalities. Again, do not allow the class to move forward until you've reached some agreements: detailed description of the stank, what language might be more precise, a short list of questions that need to be answered about the stinky word (what is it trying to get at, why does it stink, is it always stinky, after knowing all of that, when will you, if ever, use it). The list of stinky words need not be kept, as in a grammar,
or standard book of language—most of you will notice that I’m not an advocate of policing or closing the loopholes of living language, but you can begin to reference "our stinky word list" in the spirit of encouraging other students to call out stinky words (they speak themselves, or when they are spoken). This technique is an excellent one to foreground the uses, politics and implications of language (oral traditions, the vernacular, standardization, and worldview).

"Disciplined attention to the true meaning of ‘it feels right to me.’"

This technique can be used on an everyday basis, when things get sticky, or just when you feel it coming (because of the class culture, or a particular reading). I ask students to bring in three places (they can point to with their fingers!) in the text that: 1. They loved! 2. They HATED! and 3. They found totally and utterly incomprehensible. The MAIN and ESSENTIAL point of this exercise is to point out that the things we love, hate or do not understand indicate places of greater depth, significance, and complexity than we usually afford them. Identifying them from the start allows us to get inside that information and exhaust it. This is a very useful technique for students who are uncritically dismissing, or embracing, material (or opinions). This technique also breaks down the desire to maintain binary thinking about emotions and thought—disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me" requires us to see that thought carries emotion, and emotion carries thought. We can then endeavor to apply ourselves to the practice of disciplined attention to ourselves as scholars. This is necessary if we also are attempting to apply disciplined attention to course material.

I've adapted this from Audre Lorde's "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

In the End, As In the Beginning

You have to come up with something that works for you! To do this you must develop yourself and your selection of material (refer to my earlier statements about these techniques relying on your strengths). Developing ease will come over time, and is most painlessly achieved when you indulge your personal style while keeping your ear, eye and soul tuned to your unique assumptions and weaknesses.

If you find yourself needing to develop or explore your own personal pedagogical style, or strengthen yourself, or your materials, I am happy to work with individuals or to set up additional group workshops. Following is a list of options: What Story Do You Want To Tell (Course Design); Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality and Spirituality: Finding Language and Meaning; You Don't See Me: Can't Hear Me, Can't Educate Me; Reflective Recall and Intentional Practice (Identifying and Developing Your Pedagogical Style); Slaying the Content Monster (Innovation, Assessment and Rules of Engagement), and Diaspora Literacy: Meeting the Knowledge Demands of Your Subject.