Teaching Philosophy Statement

“I have never hit anyone before.” A first-year student admits to me. Ordinarily, non-violence should be celebrated, but here in my stage combat class, this young woman seems ashamed of her lack of experience. We go slow. First, I ask her to punch at the air. I correct her stance, and remind her to breathe. I have her punch the palm of my hand, and then I take her hand and guide it to the spot on my stomach, demonstrating the position and amount of force that I feel comfortable with. Bit by bit, the student becomes more comfortable in turn. And when I offer her to try shouting something as she punches, I see a switch happen in her body: she is grounded, loose, and confident. She has incorporated the gesture into her body’s vocabulary; the move has become her own.

As this moment illustrates, every body is wired differently. Much like an athletic coach, my work as a physical theatre and movement instructor require me to be familiar with students on an individual basis – their prior knowledge, their limitations, and the skills they want to work on developing. At the start of every class, we do a full body check in: running the palms of our hands over our bodies meticulously, we check to see where we are sore or tender and identify areas where we do not want to be touched. This information is shared when students pair up, reinforcing partner communication as an essential part of our process in class. Establishing a daily practice of a physical check-in honors students’ autonomy of their bodies during the rehearsal process. These check-ins also develop a bond trust between the students and I: students know when I push them that I am asking them to do something I believe they are capable of, and should they feel unsafe, they can voice their concern and I will always listen.

My classroom is structured as a Negotiated Space, where as a class we understand that our mutual success depends on actively working together to find common ground. Thinking critically about space in an educational setting has been a major area of research for me. My search for alternative solutions to the more static concept of safe space has led me to formulate the framework of Negotiated Space, where all participants in the classroom are engaged in a cycle of listening to peers and advocating for their core beliefs. The first week in all my classes we draw up a contract that states what we as a collective require to be successful, be it arriving on time, allowing a moment for students to re-focus their energy as they enter a new space, or a plan for how we will handle disagreements that may arise. Setting aside the time for students to voice their own needs allows them to develop an awareness of their agency as individuals and artists, as well as the impact they have on others in the room. Further, these contracts create a common bond that allows for trust and community to begin to develop, allowing for more risk-taking on the students’ part.

To further encourage risk taking and agency in their work, I prioritize the development of students’ ability to articulate intention within their creative process. My assignments challenge students to make choices about their work. In my stage combat class, for example, I assign the students five moves we have learned as a class, but ask them to create their own sequence of the choreography from beginning to the end. They are also responsible for devising the given circumstances of the fight**.** As a class, we workshop these fight scenes, looking critically at how the blocking choices support their intended scenario. Focusing on the intention of choices made in a piece enables the class to move towards a deeper understanding of the creative process. As students hone their ability to identify intentionality in another artist’s choices, a parallel aptitude for articulating intention emerges within their own work. By setting the parameters of an assignment — a required length, specific moves that must be incorporated, etc. — while also leaving room for different options, I encourage students to take risks with their choices and to instill personal ownership of the work they produce.

My classroom environment, assignment structure, and underlying coach-like approach to teaching demonstrate my commitment to connect with each student on an individual level and to instill in them a desire for risk-taking and agency within the creative process. Further, my research on pedagogical strategies for Negotiated Spaces reflects my dedication to promoting safety, communication, and personal connections in an educational setting. Above all, my methodology of teaching reflects my passion to use theatre as a means to risk, create, and establish connections within and beyond the classroom.