A process-based approach to learning—grounded in cognitive apprenticeship, writing as a mode of learning, and critical reflective practice—shapes my pedagogy. Before coming to UF, I had experience with a range of learning communities, from the small liberal arts college, to a college reentry program for adult learners, to a “one room schoolhouse” program that mixed graduate M.A. and undergraduate majors, to freshman ESL students learning basic composition; I even taught American literature to felons at a maximum security prison.

Fortunately, like most English graduate students, I came of age in the gateway composition classroom; this required instructors to motivate students to adopt the expectations of academic writing. Here, I learned that what we ask of students is not necessarily intuitive practice or even safe—taking on a public voice, writing for an academic audience, sharing their writing and having it subjected to close scrutiny, being asked to speak out and make original arguments. As a result, I learned to carefully consider my environment. Who are the students and what brought them to this course? How much background do they have in the subject matter? What knowledges and home literacies can they usefully bring to bear on the course content? How can I draw from their diverse strengths and move each of them, at whatever their level, to improve, challenge themselves, and gain confidence, skill, and dexterity as writers and thinkers?

The idea of “cognitive apprenticeship” undergirds my teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Cognitive apprenticeship shapes how I lead classes, how I sequence writing assignments, and how I design my syllabi. This model has three steps: modeling, scaffolding, then fading (Collins 6). To model means to make the learning process visible, to show the mind at work, simulating the task at hand (for example, through a sample piece of writing, or by soliciting a seemingly unworkable observation from a student and running with it). Scaffolding means offering the necessary support and apparatus to carry out a task—from clear guidelines to guided discussion, to small group work where students problem solve, to directed archival research. Finally, fading means gradually removing the support and encouraging self-directed research and problem solving. For example, in my “Indian Captivity Narrative” course, after three weeks of guided work on foundational texts in the genre, I assign a new primary text for students to read, discuss, then teach to each other in small groups, without a lecture component.

In a typical week where I assign one novel, we might in the first period spend ten minutes on reactions, likes, dislikes; then I offer a short background on whatever is significant about the author or the text, then foreground some of the key interpretive issues that will help them best understand why the text is central to the concerns of our course, facilitating discussion on their responses. In two subsequent course periods, I begin with guided discussion that links back to the last class and integrates new, student-generated questions, then add some collaborative group work. To build depth, I often introduce a brief critical apparatus, then have them compose a short freewrite response, then swap reactions. To scaffold, I might display three disparate critical interpretations of a piece of literature, each plausible, each clear, then put them in groups to weigh, assess, and debate which interpretation (if any) they find most productive. Or I ask them to discuss a possible topic for a three-page analysis paper on a topic that emerged from that day’s discussion. I also sequence writing assignments so that students receive assessment on at least two short assignments before they turn in a major essay. They also workshop their essays in class, with peers, before I read them. This way, students better understand my expectations and receive advice on how to improve before submitting their major essays.
Over the years, I have come to better understand how and why students write. Students often think they need to know their ideas before writing. I teach students that as experienced writers, we write precisely to make sense of texts, to find our line of argument, to develop our thinking about texts. Experienced writers then share their work and revise; this process is not intuitive to less experienced writers, who are less likely to think of writing as a way of knowing.

I bring the diversity and energetic flux of my discipline, Early American literature, to the classroom. I design courses that emphasize Early American literature’s influence on later periods; my Indian Captivity Narrative course offers intensive background and practice working with colonial New England “Indian captivity” accounts; we then study frontier fiction, slave narratives, contemporary prison writing, and twentieth century Native American writing that “talks back to” the colonial texts. Likewise in the prison literature course, we examine the historical archive of late eighteenth century essays and pamphlets by defenders of the penitentiary, then trace the influence of these thinkers on antebellum American literature; later, we analyze how inmate-authored fiction both engages with and contests the assumptions of the earliest defenders of the prison. I love foregrounding how the past is both strange and accessible, both eerily parallel and distinctly different. My “American Literature and Sexuality to 1900” course uses a most unlikely and “repressive” text—a Puritan sermon condemning all forms of illicit sexuality, to illustrate Foucault’s hypothesis that sexual knowledge was not repressed but in fact proliferated from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Students (graduate and undergraduate) then investigate the vast archive of emergent discourses—health manuals, seduction pamphlets, sexology case studies—and trace their influence on a range of canonical and non-canonical literature prior to 1900.

I want students to make their own knowledge, to take risks, and to push themselves past obvious readings while engaging with texts and archives in a historically-informed way, so I encourage them to read both with and against the grain of each text. I consider it a failure if students produce similar arguments in their papers or seem to be telling me what I wish to hear. Many Early American texts, forged from the borderland of cross-cultural contact, articulate racially- and sexually-charged ideologies. Yet if I want students to think about American identity, difference, and the issues of power that divide Americans, then I also need to allow for tension, not force consensus. This is what Joseph Harris has called “accepting the challenge of teaching the contact zone” (as opposed to teaching in the contact zone).

One final thought captures much of my philosophy: “As teachers, we have to take on the risky business of looking at the academic house we live in, and the ways we invite students into it. We have to be willing to look at how we ourselves entered it, how much we brought with us, how much we were forced to leave at the door. We have to make ourselves brave enough to risk the dissent that inevitably comes when democracy is in action” (Roskelly 5). Whatever ways I can successfully foster self-reflexivity—whether sharing my own resistance to a text and how I worked through it, soliciting anonymous mid-semester feedback in each course, or even having students respond to my assessment of their work, I have learned that the more I open up the doors of my “academic house” for inspection, the more my students are willing to speak out, take risks, and develop the kind of reflective practice that underpins successful critical thinking and writing.