



## Teaching Purpose

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Why do I teach? I frequently engage that question. I think, why am I in the classroom? And I'm not referring to the day to day or the charge as an English professor at Hostos Community College to help students write and organize essays, and guide them through learning research skills. Those and other student learning outcomes (SLOs) are clearly stated on my syllabus, and I intimately understand the responsibility of delivering on them. Although, I respect and honor those SLOs, they are only part of what motivates me to teach. What drives my teaching are the principles of General Education and how they facilitate my pledge to help students connect their education to articulating their purpose. Discovering or becoming conscious of purpose is challenging at any age but if I can begin to engage students with the idea that coming to class and doing their assignments in my class, and all their classes, is connected to something greater in their lives, then that possibility fuels me.

General Education, at one point, was thought of as a uniform classical education with a common core of classes. With the rise of science in the 20th Century, colleges moved from a broad general education to specialization or areas of study and the concept of general education was sidelined. But Gen Ed has undergone rethinking at several pivotal moments in time. In 1977, studies by Harvard College, the U.S. Commissioner of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching ushered in one of the biggest transformations in General Education which still echo in today's ideologies. Those studies sparked a movement toward braiding into teaching the skills, knowledge and manners that everyone needs to live by to be successful people in work, family life, community and society (and the world). Hostos, like most colleges and universities, is set up by majors or areas of study, but general education asks us to apply skills across the curriculum that include critical thinking and writing; public speaking, presentations and self-expression; learning about a variety of cultures and diversity (race, gender, religion, class, age, sexual orientation and ethnicity); interweaving subjects and ideas from across disciplines to develop and understand the value of integration; among other Gen Ed competencies to connect the classroom to skills that will translate to their lives outside of college and for employability in the workforce.

The Hostos Community College General Education Core Competencies vibrate with the ideas listed above and help connect my lessons and selected materials to the lives of my students beyond the classroom. My classes range from developmental and required composition classes (including introduction to literature) and electives, from the Creative Writing Workshop to Studies in Fiction. So, learning the building blocks of an essay, unlocking the meaning of a poem, identifying the dramatic structure of narrative, identifying and explaining the themes in a work are all directly connected to students living intentional, fulfilling lives. I discuss how being able to construct an essay is also gaining an understanding of structure and how to organize thoughts and ideas. I share that the way a slow read of a text reveals deeper meaning, so in life we may need to slow down to achieve a deeper understanding of ideas. The same way that questioning an assumption in a newspaper article or short story leads to students being critical thinkers, thus questioning the assumptions of their cultures and beliefs and can lead to deeper affirmations of their beliefs or an expanded notion of what they understood

at the start of their exploration. I share that if they can excel in writing an essay, they've gained a skill with which they can help their child or a neighbor's child. Simply, I build on the principles of general education and the Gen Ed Core Competencies to help me weave intellectual and social expectations of the real world into the course work, and to connect what happens in the classroom to life. Teaching in the English Department naturally lends itself to engage students in critical thinking and to delve into experiences and cultures that are different from their own as we read and analyze essays that deal with life and the world, and explore fiction, poetry and drama that navigate the terrain of human emotion and where characters face obstacles and figure out ways around them. This creates the natural environment for the examination of life and purpose. When I turn those questions the characters face toward the students, they can discover and shape their own purpose.

It's through this teaching approach and learning exchange that I hope students begin to develop a greater sense of purpose, and the role of purpose as it relates to education and well-being. It's difficult for most of us to connect to our own purpose let alone to teach and to foster it in others. Yet, by connecting purpose to why they are in the classroom enables them to imagine, then develop, meaningful and thriving lives. This idea is supported by several studies, including that of William Damon, the author of *Greater Expectations*, who says that "the key ingredient for the highly engaged is that they have developed a clear sense of purpose in their lives that motivates them and gives them direction." Sometimes simply raising the question of "what matters to them most?" or "if you can change something in your world, what would that change be?" can have students begin to engage with purpose. I also encourage them to bring in their dreams and to imagine their vision for a better life. Then, I leverage the knowledge they have and compliment it with the texts, lessons and assignments that develop skills – mainly reading, writing and critical thinking. Then, I connect how their knowledge along with learned skills brings

them closer to achieving their visions of a better life because the utility of that knowledge and those skills aren't limited to the classroom.

Again, this might seem like a natural fit in an English class or in the Humanities and Behavioral Sciences, but this exploration has a place in math, chemistry, criminal justice, nursing and across all classes.

Heather Malin's book, *Teaching for Purpose*, states that "Students who cannot connect their learning to any sense of purpose are less likely to be motivated by or engaged in what they are doing at school." She shares that if we can shift students away from being only motivated by grades and required classes, and to connect how those classes, collectively, help them become better thinkers, that that is a first step toward purpose. I add to that idea by stating to my students that every class and every assignment is an opportunity for them to grow closer to achieving success and attaining the skills to build a better life.

So whether it's in an ENG 100 class where we are charting a path to deeper understanding of texts and writing about them critically within a structure or in a Creative Writing Workshop where students are crafting narratives, the capacity to funnel or redirect those Gen Ed skills to engage the greater purpose of their education is what I braid into my teaching practice and is what ignites my passion for teaching.



## Works Cited

Damon, William. *Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in Our Homes and Schools*. Free Press Paperbacks, 1996.

Malin, Heather. *Teaching for Purpose: Preparing Students for Lives of Meaning*. Harvard Education Press, 2018.

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[https://www.ndsu.edu/cule/pdfs/basic\\_background\\_readings\\_National\\_aac\\_Strong\\_Foundations\\_Twelve\\_Principles\\_for\\_Effective\\_General\\_Education\\_Programs.pdf](https://www.ndsu.edu/cule/pdfs/basic_background_readings_National_aac_Strong_Foundations_Twelve_Principles_for_Effective_General_Education_Programs.pdf).

## BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

Charles Rice-González, born in Puerto Rico and reared in the Bronx, is a writer, LGBTQ activist, co-founder of BAAD! The Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance and an Assistant Professor at Hostos Community College. His novel, *Chulito*, received recognition from the American Library Association and the National Book Critics Circle, he co-edited *From Macho to Mariposa: New Gay Latino Fiction*, and his play *I Just Love Andy Gibb* was published in *Blacktino Queer Performance: A Critical Anthology*. His writing's has been published in nearly a dozen anthologies including *Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing* (University of Wisconsin Press 2011), *Love, Christopher Street* (Vantage Point 2012), *QED: A Journal in LGBTQ Worldmaking* (Syracuse University 2016), and his article on Culturally Relevant Pedgogy will appear in *Teaching Black* (University of Michigan Press 2020). His honors include the Lambda Literary Foundation's Dr. Betty Berzon Emerging Writer Award in 2014, an award from the New York City Council in 2016, the Men(cion) Award from 100 Hispanic Women in 2017 and a Gay City News Impact Award in 2017 for his activism and contributions to advancing the lives of LGBTQ people. He's the chair of the board for The Bronx Council on the Arts and The National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures.

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