My goal as a teacher is to transform the way students engage with the world by giving them the knowledge and the confidence to ask questions they had never considered before taking my course. At its best, teaching should clarify what seems complex and denaturalize the commonplace. I am inspired in this regard by James Baldwin. In 1963, Baldwin penned “A Talk to Teachers” for *The Saturday Review*. He wrote that the purpose of an education is “To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions.” What he did not say was that an education guarantees easy answers. Instead, Baldwin wanted to remind teachers that an education makes a student question the power structures that perpetuate social inequality and helps them find confidence within life’s uncertainties.

I spark those questions and inspire that confidence by connecting primary evidence from the past with present day issues that impact students’ lives. I often find this intersection of the past and present by using my expertise in popular music history to provide an exciting hook to catch students’ interests. For example, after teaching a unit on the history of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, I instructed my classes to categorize songs and artists from current popular music, particularly white hip hop performers, into the categories of either cultural theft or artistic borrowing. We then debated those examples, from Pat Boone to Eminem, based on our historical study of white appropriation of black culture and the evolving definitions of artistic exchange. Not only did this offer students a chance to bring their own knowledge to the classroom, but it also showed them how to apply critical race analysis to their culture. This exercise forced students to question what they took for granted about popular music and encouraged them to rethink how culture can replicate the power structures of racial inequality from the past that persist in our present time. My teaching provided the historical knowledge necessary to make informed evaluations on the deep roots of minstrelsy in order to alert students to continuities and changes over time when it comes to the cultural politics of race.

If students understand the historical construction of the most familiar aspects of their everyday life, then that knowledge gives them the confidence to challenge accepted truths and to think about the world in new ways. The interdisciplinary nature of my teaching means that my students will not only encounter new ways of thinking about culture but will likely find new conceptual frameworks for the learning process. I emphasize that thinking holistically about a given topic requires an eclectic set of tools and encourage students to reach beyond the walls that usually divide one discipline from another.

I model this interdisciplinary thinking in every class meeting by using cultural artifacts to generate excitement about the past. My approach turns abstract concepts into nuanced understanding and transforms the past into something relevant to students’ experiences as young people in the twenty-first century. While teaching a unit on Civil War memory and the Lost Cause, I used a video of recent July 4th celebrations in front of the Confederate memorial at the Stone Mountain Theme Park in Georgia to learn about race, region, and collective memory. How was it, I asked, that a monument to three Confederate leaders functioned as the center of patriotic family entertainment on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia, one of the most racially progressive cities in the nation? Our class then dug into the origins of the monument to discuss the significance of organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Stone Mountain, and the role of the film *Birth of a Nation* in the reformation of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915. I then pivoted to a discussion of the relationships between sectional reconciliation, African American citizenship, racial violence in the early twentieth century, and Jim Crow segregation. At the end of the unit, we returned to the video and students applied what they had learned about the history of the Confederate memory to deconstruct the messages about race, region, and nationalism conveyed in the Stone Mountain video.

Cultivating the kind of classroom where ideas about race, identity, and culture flow freely can present unique challenges. It requires a demeanor of respect, humility, and candor on my part. Likewise, I intend for my approach to inspire the same attitudes within my students. My method of teaching shows students that being a professor is not about assuming a position of authority by lording my education over theirs. Rather, I consider myself simply as the more experienced student on a lifelong road of learning. My posture breaks down the barriers of intimidation and insecurity that stifle the exchange of ideas. As a result, students feel comfortable with me as an educator and as an advisor on life inside and outside of the classroom. I am reminded of a class I held only hours after the devastating *Rolling Stone* magazine report on rape culture at the University of Virginia. My students sat stunned and the room was tense with emotion. Rather than forge ahead with the lecture, I tossed the lesson plan, and the students, most of whom were women, devoted the next hour to expressing their feelings about toxic masculinity on our campus and the institutional responses to sexual violence. While not an easy conversation, I felt it deserved more attention than sticking to the day’s curriculum. This discussion showed students that they were not alone in witnessing and surviving the pervasive sexual assaults on our campus. They built solidarity and reminded each other of their power to fight back against this systemic abuse.

My sensitivity to the needs and abilities of each student also factors into the way I assess learning outcomes. While I maintain rigorous standards for my students’ comprehension of the material, a student who tries is a student who succeeds in my classes. That does not mean easy As. Instead, it means I am attentive to the way different students learn in different ways. My grading relies on a mixture of class participation, reading response essays, digital humanities projects, and exams. By offering a wide array of methods for students to demonstrate their engagement with the material, my classes accommodate different learning styles and strengths. This approach to learning assessments reflects my overall commitment to inclusivity, as I strive to honor the different levels of knowledge and diverse life experiences that each student brings to the class.

Students respond positively to my approach in the classroom and have shared how much it means to them in the evaluations of my classes. One respondent stated, “He is kinder than many, cares about us individually as people more than just students, always has the material prepared, and wants to see us succeed.” In terms of my class management, one student noted that “He effectively encourages an environment where students do not need to be self-conscious about speaking.” Similarly, another student found that I “was always kind and approachable, and very helpful both inside and outside the classroom.” The same student wrote that they “never felt uncomfortable about speaking up in discussion, which is a big deal for me since I am usually very shy.” I feel that these statements reflect my success in creating an inclusive environment that is welcoming for all students, regardless of their race, gender identity, ability, accessibility challenges, or prior knowledge of the subject.

Ultimately, what I want to achieve through teaching goes back to Baldwin’s insistence that learning begins when students ask questions. To close his address to teachers, he shared that if he were teaching he would want his students to know that “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it” and that they possess “the right and the necessity to examine everything.” That necessary examination begins in my classroom and gives students the basis to continue learning as they enter into the wider world.