

Teaching Statement

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My research is about pregnancy and motherhood, and so perhaps it is unsurprising that I am partial to the comparison of teaching to midwifery. The similarities are compelling. When successful, teachers support their students through transformative experiences in the classroom; they serve as both coaches and advocates; they make students' hard work memorable and enjoyable; they help students to conceive wholly new things. In the best cases, students fall in love with the objects of their learning.

I am hardly the first to make the comparison. Socrates likened himself to a midwife in the *Theaetetus*, as his task was to hasten and ease the labors of learning. In fact, the Socratic method is sometimes referred to as *maieutics*, from *μαιευτικός*, the Greek word for midwife. The analogy is sharpened, however, in the context of my research. My work stresses both the childbearer's agency *and* her dependency on social support; in the teacher-midwife analogy, students' agency can be underscored without obscuring the vital role teachers play in students' learning. Several principles can be drawn from the analogy.

First, the best midwives center their pregnant patients. Similarly, my teaching is student-centered. No two students are the same; their needs and backgrounds vary, sometimes substantially. Midwives must adapt to the needs and backgrounds of their patients, and so must teachers. Sometimes the pace of discussion must be slowed—or accelerated. I have learned to regularly assess the pace and scope of my instruction with anonymous check-ins during the closing minutes of class. One-on-one conferences have also helped me better assess my students' unique needs; I have generally had more than three quarters of students take advantage of the individual meetings I offer. Just as the action in the delivery room is all about the person giving birth, my classrooms center students.

However, the best midwives also know that childbirth requires significant exertion. Centering students' needs does not mean the learning process will be easy. I ask a lot of my students, though always such that their labors facilitate learning. For instance, in many courses I have taught, I have had students collaboratively draft study materials. Before class, students contribute to a chart with rows comprised of the assigned readings' titles, and columns identifying the texts' thesis statements, key terms, and motivations, as well as students' critical questions. It is a considerable project, but at the semester's end, students have an extensive index that supports their writing and studying. Just as midwives leverage childbearers' efforts to make them worthwhile, I order students' assignments so that they gain the most from their labors.

Finally, the best midwives enable their students to fall in love with the fruit of their efforts. Childbirth is hard work. So is learning. It is impractical to expect students to exert themselves without their personal investment in the material. As such, I always encourage my students to relate course material to their own lives. I often invite students to connect assigned readings to podcasts, news articles, or blogs they find compelling. At times I have had students take turns impersonating the authors of course material and submit to their classmates' interrogation about concerns that the readings provoked. My aim is always to help my students discover what they love about the material, in classroom discussions and written assignments. Just as midwives' orienting goal is to introduce childbearers to their treasured newborns, my goal is to help students delight in the new knowledge they acquire in the classroom.