

# Teaching Statement

*Rachel Ameen*

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Geography and the Environment, Syracuse University

---

Whether I'm teaching thirty undergraduates about environmental justice or calling a contra dance for a hundred people in a community center, the challenge is the same: how do I help people engage with complex material, feel confident trying something new, and leave wanting to come back? My approach to teaching centers on creating learning environments where students actively participate, feel genuinely welcomed, and connect what they're learning to their lives and the world around them. I practice this philosophy through three interconnected principles: multilevel active engagement, responsive and creative communication, and adaptive teaching.

## **Multilevel Active Engagement**

Engagement isn't something I can demand from students. It is something I earn through demonstrated commitment to their learning. I forefront my own enthusiasm, commitment, and academic labor because I've found that students reciprocate effort when they see authentic investment in their success.

Exemplary of this philosophy are the weekly dossiers I developed for GEO 103: Environment and Society. Rather than assigning a textbook, I created visual, scaffolded learning packets that guide students through key concepts using maps, infographics, data visualizations, and structured prompts. In-class participation skyrocketed, and the visual nature served students with varying English proficiency levels and different learning styles. I also make it a priority to learn every student's name within the first two weeks. This gesture communicates that I see them as individuals, and it changes the dynamic of our interactions throughout the term.

Learning doesn't always happen inside a classroom. In Spring 2022, I was teaching about environmental and social justice at the University of Washington when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. After covering the day's planned material, I told my students where I was going and why: to join the demonstrations gathering on campus. I invited any who wanted to come. It was pouring rain. Most of them came anyway. For many, this was their first experience with activism. I demonstrated that course content matters beyond the classroom, and that the concepts we study connect directly to their lives and futures.

## **Responsive and Creative Communication**

Complex concepts require multiple entry points. My most effective teaching happens when I can connect abstract ideas to students' lived experiences while simultaneously showing them how those experiences fit into larger systems and scales. When teaching about green consumerism, for example, I start by gesturing to students' own metal water bottles, spurring conversation on personal choices before zooming out to campus sustainability initiatives, then to corporate greenwashing, and finally to global climate capitalism. By the end, students understand both how their personal choices fit into larger patterns and why systemic change matters more than individual action alone.

Humor is one of my most effective pedagogical tools. A well-timed joke lowers the stakes, signals that it's safe to make mistakes, and reminds students that learning should be enjoyable. I regularly incorporate pop culture references and current events to draw students into material they might otherwise find intimidating. As one student noted: "She was very passionate about the subject and included some jokes into the lesson which I thought were funny. She also has a very welcoming and upbeat personality that makes being in the classroom entertaining." By designing multiple pathways into the material (visual, verbal, and experiential), I ensure more students can access and engage with what we're studying.

## **Adaptive Teaching**

Good teaching requires constant adjustment: to individual student needs, to the composition of a particular class, to unexpected events in the world, and to the evolving tools and contexts that shape how learning happens. I read the room continuously, watching for signs of confusion, disengagement, or fatigue, and I adjust accordingly. If an explanation isn't landing, I try a different approach. If students are burned out, we shift to a lighter activity. I plan ahead carefully but am always prepared to improvise.

My adaptive approach extends to emerging challenges. The rapid proliferation of generative AI has fundamentally shaped my course design. The dossiers I developed are intentionally AI-resistant: they require students to hand-annotate maps, analyze spatial patterns, and demonstrate understanding through tasks that AI cannot easily complete. My in-class activities focus on discussion, collaborative work, and applied analysis that must happen in real time.

Through workshops with the Country Dance and Song Society, the TA Mentorship program at the University of Washington, and peer trainings at Syracuse, I've studied teaching methodologies focused on accessibility, real-time adaptation, and creating inclusive learning communities. These experiences have reinforced that effective pedagogy transcends disciplinary boundaries. Whether I'm teaching a dance sequence or a geographic concept, the principles remain the same: pay attention to your learners, adjust based on what you observe, and never stop experimenting with new approaches.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching is iterative. I learn from student feedback, adjust based on what does and doesn't work, and remain committed to improving. My students deserve nothing less than my full commitment to making material accessible, relevant, and transformative, whether in the classroom, in the dance hall, or in the pouring rain at a campus demonstration.