**Ruth M. Mirtz**
**Teaching Statement for Job Application Portfolio**

My philosophy of teaching centers around student learning; that is, I focus on what I can do to help my students learn and how I can structure a classroom as a place of discovery and engagement for all students. I see my role in the classroom as multi-faceted: as the facilitator, I set the tone for the class and arrange the classroom environment so that all students are encouraged and challenged; as the expert writer, I engage students in complex issues about reading and writing and refuse to allow easy answers or quick-fix solutions to problems; as the evaluator, I use formative feedback to push students to do their best work.

My goal as a teacher is to guide students as fellow inquirers, by asking difficult and even unanswerable questions, by supporting students as they internalize their learning, and by sharing my own writing and investigations into language. I want my students to be critical writers and readers for the rest of their lives, not just for the length of a semester. Because I believe that thoughtful ideas are the result of a community working together to solve problems and push boundaries, I am particularly interested in giving my students the kind of writing situations that motivate them to seek out voices and experiences other than their own. Especially in first-year writing classes, students need to see themselves as active constructors of meaning, not merely as writers of canned emotion and sentiment.

My undergraduate writing classroom looks like many process classrooms, with student-centered, process-oriented activities at the core of the course. I believe my best teaching results from a careful combination of many elements: periodic individual conferences, weekly small group peer response, student-generated paper topics, student-led discussions, constant supportive responses to student texts, and challenging reading assignments about the power of language. Collaborative assignments, attention to the issues of critical computer literacy, and the production of student magazines and anthologies (and soon, websites) are also central activities in my writing courses. Direct instruction in the formalities of standard academic prose and documentation I believe must always be presented in the context of meaning-making; that is, grammar and punctuation lessons at the college level are best placed squarely within the process of a paper assignment when students can see the effect of their words and the way mechanics serve the purpose of a specific text and audience.

As a graduate teacher, I don't see my roles changing drastically from those as an undergraduate teacher. Graduate students in my Theories of Composition courses need more experience working with other thinkers as they learn to research and theorize their own ideas, and graduate papers are more likely to be close to publishable quality when they've undergone "peer review" among other graduate students. I believe that graduate students need the breadth and depth of knowledge that comes with critical reading of theorists and researchers; however, they also need support in the process of seeing themselves as knowledge-makers in a disciplinary field. Most of my graduate courses, then, are designed to discuss the knowledge in the field of composition and rhetoric, as well as to discuss the nature of that knowledge and how it is produced.

As a teacher of new teaching assistants, I relish the challenge of the balancing theory and practice for new teachers who are eager to know exactly "how" to teach but also need to know "what" to teach. Some of the ideas I use to prepare new teachers come from my experiences with the Nebraska Writing Project, which is structured like many National Writing Project sites. I

design my teacher-training course around three principles: 1) credible writing teachers must see themselves as writers, 2) thoughtful writing teachers need a background in composition theory, and 3) effective writing teachers need practice teaching and contact with other new teachers. In my experience, new teachers do their best work when they have a basic knowledge of the most critical issues concerning post-adolescent and adult learning, when they have wrestled with theories about the workings of discourse in society, and when they have support and feedback from other teachers.

The intellectual framework for my teaching philosophy is an amalgam of theories drawn from radical pedagogy, critical literacy, rhetoric, and research in learning from ethnographers and teacher-researchers. Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks have been tremendous influences on the way I see power and resistance as forces to be managed in the classroom. Ann Berthoff, Peter Elbow, and other mainstream contemporary theorists have shown me how to focus on the workings of language to motivate and challenge students, although theorists such as M. M. Bakhtin and Lev Vygotsky have been even more helpful for defining the rationales and goals of my first-year composition courses. While I have not yet found a fully satisfying hypothesis for critical literacy which accounts for computer-networked communication, internet research, and student websites, I feel that area of study holds a great deal of promise for improving our instruction. Overall, however, none of these theories takes particular precedence over discovering for myself and with my students, through feedback and dialogue in the classroom, where my students are and where they need to go.

When I first began teaching writing courses 11 years ago, a professor asked me to write about why I wanted to teach. I wrote something about how I thought teaching writing was a way to change the world. I still cannot find a better answer to the question of why I choose to teach; in fact, I am more convinced today that language has the greatest power to improve people's lives. That’s why I ask myself as a teacher and my students as fellow inquirers to be reflective thinkers, writers, and readers; to think critically, through reading and writing, about our assumptions and habits of language use; to study and assess consciously our processes and products in the context of our values and goals; and to develop into the sophisticated readers and writers needed for effective citizenship in a diverse society.