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Teaching Philosophy for Award Application

When I first began teaching, some 13 years ago, I prepared lectures and exams based on what I thought was important about the material we were trying to cover. I told my students what to learn and how to write their papers. I talked a lot during class and I was always frustrated with trying to engage students in a discussion during the last five minutes of class.

Back then, I didn't realize that what attracted me so steadily to teaching wasn't so much the *teaching* as it was the *learning*. Eventually, I realized that learning requires engagement in the knowledge-making enterprise itself, not just listening to its pronouncement. My goals as a teacher today are to guide students as inquirers, often as my fellow inquirers, by asking complex and often unanswerable questions, by supporting students as they combine small steps into conceptual internalized learning, and by sharing my own investigations into writing and language with them. I want my undergraduate students to be *life-long* writers and readers, not just for the length of a semester. Equally important is to push students to exceed their own standards, to write papers with structures and ideas more complex than they've ever written before, to write to real audiences who may not automatically care about their arguments or motivations. I love the "aha" moments when students make tremendous break-throughs in front of my eyes, but they are not as common (and perhaps not as enduring) as the semester-long, gradual, synthesizing changes in students' thoughts and writing.

I also try to use my experiences as a writer to help teach other writers. The Gordon Rule decrees that students in first-year writing courses will write 7,000 words. I recently added up the assignments in my ENC 1102 course and came up with about 24,000 words. This little exercise reminded me of two parts of my philosophy as a writing teacher, which arise out of direct experience: 1) it takes a lot of writing to become a better writer and 2) all college students are writers.

However, to meet all these goals in a writing classroom, a teacher must have more than a little knowledge about individual students, so she must be comfortable with a closer relationship to students and be more accessible to students in general. Acquiring such knowledge about her learners requires, at least, 1) individual conferences with students throughout the semester, 2) asking for feedback from students about assignments, activities, and evaluation procedures, 3) devising assignments which ask students to begin with knowledge they have and then insist they move to knowledge they don't yet have.

To that purpose, I frequently use small group work and peer response as a classroom technique. I believe that thoughtful ideas are the result of a community working together to solve problems. I try to give my students the kind of writing problems that motivate them to seek out voices and experiences other than their own. Especially in first-year writing classes (one of the areas in which I specialize), students need to see themselves as constructors or builders of meaning, not merely as expressors of canned emotion and sentiment. However, even 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; I often see myself as working against the traditional educational model of individual learners and individual evaluation. I know from my own experiences as a researcher that outside responses to my ideas and collaboration with colleagues are essential to generating advanced ideas in my field.

As Director of the First Year Writing Program and as a researcher in student writing and the teaching of writing, I have the opportunity to combine my goals as a teacher with my goals as a trainer of new teachers and new writers. With the training of new teaching assistants, I take a similar stance: that teachers develop and improve their teaching when they ask questions about their teaching and when they ask their students about how they learn. For example, I ask all new teaching assistants to articulate their teaching philosophies every summer as they prepare to teach first-year writing courses, to revise those philosophies as they gain experience, and to prepare a teaching portfolio that represents their work as instructors.

One of the recent changes in my own teaching has been in what I consider the “content” of a first-year writing course. While I still focus a great deal on the writing skills that all students need to develop, I have learned that those skills don’t translate into abilities unless they are contextualized as language issues. For instance, when my first-year students work on advanced mechanical rules such as the use of semicolons, they also need to discuss how ideas connect and how brains create categories, in order for the use of a semicolon to become the meaning-making choice.

A second important change in my teaching has come as I have compared the learning strategies of first-year students (post-adolescents), junior and senior English majors (who have made a commitment to a field of study), and English graduate students (who hope to make contributions to the field of English soon). While there are vast difference in the needs of these students, I find important common ground for all learners: the safety and risk factor in all these courses where students must share their ideas and beliefs in their writing, discovering the “starting point” of learning for students as individuals rather than as an amorphous group, and as I mentioned above, the need for all students to make connections with other students as fellow learners with similar goals. These common grounds mean some common activities at differing levels of complexity and detail, such as these: initiating collaborative projects that induce comfort rather than discomfort with the course materials and fellow students; or asking students to define and describe additional personal goals for each course and to devise plans for working toward the goals.

My teaching philosophy will, of course, continue to evolve, although I have tried to describe the tenets that I think will change the least in upcoming years. I can see some changes in *how* I teach writing on the near horizon, though. For instance, as we continue to use more computers and computer network technology, the relationship between a writer and her tools and the physical distance between teacher and student will change how I teach writing. As definitions of literacy continue to expand and contract and as the needs of my students after graduation change to meet the job market, some of my goals for writing students will change, too.