

**Ruth M. Mirtz**  
**Candidate's Evidence on Teaching (Tenure Process)**

My philosophy of teaching centers around student learning; that is, I focus on what I can do to help my students *learn* more than on what I think I should teach them. Basically, I want my students' learning to be a matter of discovery and engagement as they work through an assignment.

When I first began teaching, some 15 years ago, I prepared my lectures and exams based on what I thought was important about the material we were trying to cover. I quickly began to realize, however, 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 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 my students. I want my undergraduate students to be critical writers and readers for the rest of their lives, not just for the length of a semester. In my work as a supervisor of teaching assistants, I take the same stance: that teachers develop and improve their teaching when they are asked questions about their teaching, as well as when they ask their students about how they learn.

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, and I hope that I 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 active constructors of meaning, not merely as writers 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. For example, because I help dozens of new teaching assistants articulate their teaching philosophies every summer, I know that such philosophies are always "in progress." I feel that the best teaching philosophy is a working document, subject to consistent change as a teacher (including myself) tries to improve her teaching.

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 meaningful act of a writer.

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 differences in the needs of these students, I find important common ground for all learners: safety and risk factors in all these courses where students must share their ideas and beliefs in their writing, discovery of the “starting point” of learning for students as individuals rather than as a 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 and asking students to define and describe goals for each course, including devising plans for working toward the goals.

Overall, I ask my students to be reflective thinkers, writers, and readers; that is, to think critically about their own assumptions and habits of language use; to study and assess consciously their processes and products with their values and goals; and to develop into the sophisticated readers and writers needed for effective citizenship in our diverse society.