



Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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The normal role of human beings in and with the world is not a passive one. Because they are not limited to the natural (biological) sphere but participate in the creative dimension as well, men can intervene in reality in order to change it.

-Freire

Learning to write is not a [mere] matter of learning rules that govern the use of the semi-colon or the names of sentence structures, nor is it [only] a matter of manipulating words; it is a matter of making meanings, and that is the work of the active mind.

-Ann E. Berthoff

My teaching philosophy resonates with Paulo Freire’s and bell hooks’ critical pedagogy. One of the primary aims of education should be freedom: “freedom... that connects the will to know with the will to become” as bell hooks says. Education should give students the knowledge to recognize the “limit situations” that bound them and the knowledge to overcome them. It is my goal to help students free themselves from the conditions that inhibit independent thinking and legitimate action. I want to create a learning environment that helps students become agents of their own lives, so that they can become agents in the world. Freedom, for me, is defined as the ability to change, the courage to implement goals, and the imagination to realize dreams which help the individual, the community, and the society.

In my courses, I try to achieve these goals by fostering students’ literacy and personal identity. Reading and writing are essential instruments of constructing knowledge and making meaning. They stimulate intellectual development and critical thinking. Whether we analyze the label on a Coke bottle, a personal narrative, or a professional website, I want to focus students’ attention on the rhetorical nature of discourse and the world. Our discussions help them to understand that “reading the word” is like “reading the world,” involving purpose, audience, context, and genre.

When given an assignment that invites students to make their own meanings and draw their own conclusions, they come to enjoy their newly-found meanings and voices. Based on their high-school learning experience, some of them resist, at first, Rorty’s postulate that knowledge is not “out there,” waiting to be discovered or to be revealed to them by the teacher. However, once they realize how interpretation works and how it is a function of identity, they gain the insight necessary to see that there is no immutable or objective meaning to a text, and that there is not one truth, but many, including theirs. Informed by Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, I emphasize the interpreter’s personal experience and cultural background as decisive factors in constructing meaning. For example, whether Fifi’s sisters can be considered “traitors”

or “saviors” when they separate Fifi from Manuel in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* depends on what values and principles somebody has been raised with.

Pointing out how readers become co-creators of a work leads us to one of the most important aspects of my writing courses: drawing a parallel between the processes of reading and writing. I rely on Iser’s and Smith’s reading theories when discussing “gap-filling,” reader “anticipation,” and “expectations.” I want my students to develop a double perspective that allows them to be writers and readers of their text simultaneously and to switch back and forth between what Murray calls “participant and spectator modes.” Learning to give good feedback on peers’ papers supports this process, and students are appreciative of acquiring this skill by the end of the course.

When designing an assignment, I remind students of the broad aims and principles as they are described in the syllabus. As the motto by Berthoff suggests, my emphasis is on meaning and not on form. Therefore, they have to find a clear communicative purpose that makes the assignment meaningful in their own context and, at the same time, points beyond the framework of school. I am not satisfied with a paper whose sole purpose is to fulfill a school assignment. Students write best when they have something to say and when they enjoy writing, so it is pivotal that they make the assignments matter in their lives. An essay should never be governed by form or some mystified rule. It is not the number of paragraphs or the number of sentences in a paragraph that should guide the writer. Form and language issues play a role only at the editing stage of the revision cycle.

In my classroom, the basic modes of learning are reflection and collaboration. As Bruner posits, knowledge penetrates through metacognition and reflection, so students are invited to adopt a reflective practice. Practice in writing journals, process memos, and self-evaluations create the space for students to approach their work through metacognition. The theory underlying collaboration is Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development.” Influenced by Vygotsky, I am a firm believer that learning is social, and collaborating with others nurtures students’ intellectual development and helps them reach their potential. A teacher should teach toward this potential, not “to the ripe,” but to “the ripening function.” What students can only do in collaboration today, they will be able to do alone tomorrow. Collaboration also promotes learning by maximizing students’ involvement. Workshopping essays, preparing presentations and other projects are based on pair and group work. One-on-one conferencing with students has proved to be a very effective way of collaboration. Whether students and I discuss their perception of their own writing abilities--they often say that they are not good writers or that English is just “not their thing”--or whether we brainstorm for ways to make an argument sounder, I enjoy coaching them. I help them to gain the confidence they need to realize that they *can* write and be good at it.

For all the theoretical foundations of my classroom practices, I am aware that teachers also teach by what they are and not only by what they say. I am happiest when my students tell me in their end-of-term evaluations that they consider me a role model. The essence of my teaching, “transgressing,” is enacted by my pedagogy and my life. My example confirms students’ beliefs that anybody can become anything and be successful at it.