Pedagogical statement

A colleague told me that she likes to learn something new each time she teaches; being on the learning curve at the same time as her students, she said, helps her sympathize with them as they encounter unfamiliar concepts and test new skills. My new subject for the past three years has been chairing the Writing Program, a position that has put me firmly in the role of a learner. Chairing during this review period has helped me see my own classes a bit more clearly from the point of view of my students, a view that has, inevitably, led to revision. That, in turn, has caused me to think about revision as a trope in all my work.

Solving a problem in Writing 1/2:

Off and on (mostly on) for a number of years, I have taught a first-year writing class using the memory of the American Civil War as its main inquiry. I have frequently thought of retiring this course—I have taught versions of it many times—but because it works well and I still like it, and because I have been busy these past several years, I have not yet done so.

Though always foremost a writing course, inevitably this class has changed over time, never more so than when it moved with me from the East Coast to the West Coast and thus from a kind of environmentally enforced preoccupation with a particular American past to something considerably less immediate. Though many readings have changed, and I have taken most assignments through multiple incarnations, some critical elements have stayed the same. Among other things, I take pains to establish the purpose and portability of the analytical work I assign, so that students can see how the work they do in my class translates to the writing they may do in other classes and elsewhere. Also, the sequence and basic analytical aims of each of the separate assignments remain essentially intact, as they develop a series of increasingly complex analytical operations that build upon each other. In order, students write a close analysis of a single text; consider a single closely analyzed source in the context of one or several contemporary, critical, or theoretical arguments; research and write a source-based argument of their own; and reflect synthetically on some aspect of the Civil War raised by the course. Over time, I have had a particularly restless relationship with the first of these assignments, the observation and close analysis of a single source, and include five (of six total) major variants of this assignment in my review file. (See Writing 1/2 teaching materials.)
Why teach a single source analysis as the first formal paper? Some teachers start elsewhere. They begin, perhaps, with an autobiographical paper to help students gain confidence by writing about their own most familiar subjects, themselves. (Indeed I often begin with a low-stakes writer’s history as a kind of diagnostic, but do not elevate it to the status of a formal paper.) Or they start with an analytical operation that should appear familiar to students coming out of high school: a comparison, perhaps, or a summary and response to a reading—or perhaps just a response, a first foray into engaging directly with a source. But I always want to begin my courses with focused analysis, a skill my students use in all their remaining papers in my class and indeed, in one form or another, in most other papers they write at the university. The most direct means I know of learning to analyze—hewing to observable data and drawing inferences based on this evidence—is to focus on a single source. Inevitably in a preliminary assignment I ask students to identify the moments in the text that in some way stir their emotions, to establish what in the text matters to them. Then I ask them to write a formal paper that analyzes the part of the source that they’ve identified.

My initial efforts were versions of a classic literary close analysis assignment—the first practically New Critical in its focus on text alone, the next somewhat more expansive (students could bring in some contextual sources), but still mainly literary in focus. The problem, though, was that useful though the exercise was in teaching the rigor of observation and inference, students didn’t like it, and because they didn’t like it, they didn’t find it transparent or transferable. They found it too austere, too restrictive, too much like the kind of assignment they would only have to write in school: too divorced from themselves. The assignments taught them useful skills but didn’t inspire them, and didn’t convince them of the portability of the skills required—a main reason for the assignment. So I began to experiment. In a third version, I tried offering two options, one a literary analysis and the other an effort to help students make connections between the historical source and their own society. In a fourth version, I changed the object of the close analysis from a literary text to a photograph, hoping that focusing on a visual artifact would capture the interest of students steeped in visual culture.

In the fifth version, introduced in 2005, I finally got it right: I offered students the choice of several different contemporary texts to focus on (they liked the choice), prompted them to identify their own responses to their chosen text (anger, curiosity, puzzlement, etc.), and asked them to establish how the text elicited those responses from them. This final step demanded just as much analytical rigor as the earlier paper assignments but added an important dimension by formally including the students’ own responses as subject to analysis. Here, observation of their personal responses not only began the process, but was part of the paper. Though the earlier assignments had all included preliminary work inviting students to respond to the texts, none had
asked them to make the direct connection between their reactions and their analyses the subject of their papers. In this new assignment, students felt that they had been invited into their own papers and still gained the analytical skills I felt they needed to have. The assignment was a success.

I arrived at this version of the first analytical assignment circuitously, over a number of attempts and after unraveling my general resistance to assigning most personal essays: they are both too difficult to do well and too infrequently called for in an academic setting. But by focusing so narrowly on the analytical in my introductory formal assignments I had set aside as less important the motivating force of the self. The new assignment successfully employs the personal for analytical purposes, right at the beginning of the quarter when it makes the most difference. It turns students’ attention away from themselves and toward something beyond, to the relationship between themselves and the text and thus to a productive source of, and site for, analysis. This is one way that writers are made.

Looking back at assignments for my courses, it’s easy to see that tucked into most of them, either in exploratory assignments (such as the Cold Mountain letter and database assignments included with my Writing 1/2 materials) or in the formal assignments themselves, there is some opportunity to employ the personal as a bridge to the analytical. The realization I made in the close analysis paper, though, was that the bridge wasn’t simply a path to analysis, but could usefully be the point of the enterprise, a particularly valuable lesson for students whose prior encounters with analytical writing had been, in some way, alienating or otherwise unsuccessful. The realization has begun to inflect my teaching, especially in my thinking about my newest courses, the Kresge Core course and Writing 20, each of which I taught for the first time last year, and each of which I will be revising this year.

Reenvisioning the Writing Program:

The period of this review coincides with my first three years as chair of the Writing Program, a term that began at the tail end of a series of major losses to the program. These included almost the whole of our upper division; all of our funds for tutoring entry-level, language learner, and other at-risk student writers; and, through a restrictive funding policy, most of the freedom Writing Program faculty had previously enjoyed to work closely with other campus units. Chairing a program so restricted still meant administering our remaining curriculum. It also meant working with colleagues to sustain both the program and the morale of those who work in it at a time when the possibilities for rebuilding looked bleak. If I had any role at all beyond the managerial tasks of staffing classes and calculating budgets, it was to help turn program faculty’s attention toward the things we knew we might change, toward our relationship with what we, as a
program, do and how we do it. In effect, we cultivated our own garden. Despite
the losses, the garden has been remarkably fertile, a credit to the remarkable
faculty and staff of the Writing Program and also, I hope, to work I have done as
chair to encourage them.

Planning documents:

In this review period, I have written or co-written the Writing Program’s
proposal on lecturer workload (2005), academic plan (2006), and self-study in
preparation for our External Review (2006), and I drafted, at the behest of the
Committee on Preparatory Education, CPE’s proposal to increase writing support
for underprepared students (2006). Together with Learning Support Services
director Holly Cordova, I wrote or co-wrote two proposals to the Student Fee
Advisory Committee (SFAC) to return funding for tutoring to the Writing Program,
the second of which was partially funded this year. As a group, these documents
have served both to describe what the Writing Program and its faculty do and to
set a course for the future. They also served and continue to serve as an
inventory of our resources, of what we can make available to the campus when
the campus is ready again to take advantage of its Writing Program. In some
sense these documents are foundational, reaffirming our pedagogical and ethical
commitments to the academic community and establishing realistic outlines for
the program we could become. These documents do not aim to replicate the
programs we lost but to reenvision the program within its current environment.

This group of documents has already had some effect. The Workload
Proposal, for instance, describes a plan for rational and effective full-time
workload in the Writing Program that would simultaneously provide resources for
rebuilding the program by drawing on graduate student teaching. It seems to
have been accepted by the Humanities Division as a planning model of sorts in
its efforts to expand teaching opportunities for graduate students. The CPE
proposal has provided a road map for the Writing Program’s expansion of
services to underprepared students; its recommendations have been endorsed
by CEP and other campus bodies, and most have already been adopted. The
SFAC funding will supplement funds provided by VP/DUE Ladusaw to support a
reinvented tutoring program for ELWR students that Holly Cordova and I
proposed, a project in group tutoring that has inspired its own collection of
support documents, guides, and training workshops developed this summer. And
the academic plan and self-study sketch out the range of options the campus has
vis-à-vis its Writing Program and begin to enumerate the advantages to the
campus of some return of resources. To a degree, all of these documents are
records of a dream. But they have also provided a plausible and realistic guide to
the future, one recognized and endorsed in the recent report of the Writing
Program’s External Review Committee.
“Legal” documents:

During my term as chair, the Writing Program has also redeveloped two key documents having to do with evaluation and made a case to CEP for the preservation, if only on paper, of its upper division. Our new personnel procedures (2005), drafted in response to the then-new union MOU, retain as much as possible of our historically rigorous review mechanism in order to provide as much stability and institutionalized mentoring as we can to less experienced faculty teaching in the program. Our draft Writing 2 course evaluation (2007), enthusiastically received by program faculty and soon to be finalized, vastly increases the specificity and amount of information about our courses and teaching that we will acquire once we adopt the final version. And the letter to Richard Hughey, then-chair of CEP, outlines the Writing Program’s case for preserving our two minors even in their current status of suspended animation. I co-drafted or drafted each of these in my roles as standing member and chair of the Personnel Committee, as a member of the Course Evaluation Committee (which, as program chair, I convened in 2006), and as the official voice of the Writing Program in Senate inquiries. Each of these documents, in quite different ways, revisits some element of the program’s past, preserving or revising as appropriate to best serve the students, faculty, and campus as a whole.

Two other documents:

Because of its unusual status as a campus program housed divisionally, the Writing Program’s responses to inquiries that would be relatively routine for more conventionally located departments are often rather complicated. And because of our recent history, we have gotten a number of inquiries and requests for information from the Academic Senate and the Humanities Division, among other units. Sometimes a quick meeting is all that’s required, and so I attend meetings of the Council of Provosts, advising and registrar’s staff, and so on. At other times I’ve been asked for reports, responses, memos explaining aspects of the Writing Program’s business. These tend to take a fair amount of time to complete. The memo to CEP on the minors, just noted, is one of them. Another included in this file is my report to CPB on the funding of the Writing Program, which—written during my first year as chair—took months to see through from beginning to end. I also include here my response, for the Writing Program, to VP/DUE Ladusaw’s campus advising survey, in large part because it succinctly demonstrates how a simple series of questions yields, in the case of our program, a rather complex and no doubt atypical series of answers.

Profile of a year:
Not everything of importance appears in a document. At our fall 2006
retreat, in the midst of drafting the program’s self-study and concerned that the
Humanities Division’s protracted negotiations with the campus center over a
funding agreement for the Writing Program would sap faculty energy, I asked my
colleagues for two things. First, I asked them to imagine what the program could
do for the campus if every full-time Writing Program member had at least two
course equivalencies for service, the basis of our workload proposal. The results
of their animated conversation appear in the conclusion to our self-study: an
aspirational map to our future. And second, I invited faculty members to join one
of three committees I was convening to reconsider key documents or offerings in
the program. Almost every faculty member signed up for a committee, and two of
the committees—one charged with redeveloping our standards for passing
papers in Writing 2, the other with renovating our course evaluation form—have
near-final drafts of their work. (The work of the third committee was always
envisioned to have been ongoing.) These have been excellent efforts that
demonstrate faculty willingness to develop the best program possible, even
under reduced circumstances. I am enormously proud of the work these
committees have done, and proud as well to have set it in motion.

AY 2006-07 was notable for other reasons as well—it was in fact a huge
year for the Writing Program, and demonstrates what we can do if we stay
focused on what is available to us. More or less in order, this is what 2006-07
meant to me as chair and to the Writing Program as a whole:

• Submitting an SFAC funding grant in August (and hearing that it was
  partially granted in June) to support ELWR tutoring.
• Convening and appointing chairs for subcommittees on course
  evaluations, passing standards, and curriculum.
• Drafting the Writing Program self-study.
• Drafting the Writing Program advising survey.
• Staffing double the usual number of classes for ELWR-unsatisfied
  students (I staffed seven added winter classes between the end of
  November and mid-December.)
• Advertising, and chairing the selection committee for, the first annual Non
  Fiction Student Writing Award, an award I had helped raise money for the
  previous year with the retirement of Roz Spafford.
• Hosting the Writing Program’s first annual Distinguished Author reading,
  last year with Jonathan Franzen, and the accompanying reception—
  another program begun with donations received on Roz’s retirement.
• Successfully pitching a return to fully funded tutoring for ELWR-unsatisfied
  first quarter frosh.
• Conducting a major search for a Lecturer with Security of Employment to
  serve as ELWR Coordinator, one that unfortunately failed but nevertheless
  yielded an extremely promising non-Senate faculty hire who will bolster

Abbams 6
our strength in teaching our burgeoning numbers of English language learners.

• Hiring another extremely promising lecturer from within our ranks to succeed retiring ELWR Coordinator Maria Cecilia Freeman.
• Successfully completing a years’ long effort to increase percent time (to 100%) and classification (to Level III) for our program assistant, for a first-time permanent staffing level of 2.0 FTE in the Writing Program office.
• Planning and hosting an external review.
• Successfully partnering with the Humanities Development Office and retiring faculty member Don Rothman to use the retirement as a development opportunity, and raising over $15,000 for a new student writing prize in his name.
• Planning and conducting extra faculty meetings focused on special issues (the external review, major search, divisional investigation into the potentially expanded use of teaching fellows in the Writing Program).
• Co-planning and hosting two retirement parties, one huge (about 200 people) and one modest (by request).

Cultivating our own garden has yielded excellent results.

Revisiting teaching:

Chairing the program has had its effects on my teaching, many of them salutary. I get a valuable high-altitude view of the program by working closely with campus staff and administrators and by serving as a standing member and chair of the Personnel Committee, where I also learn a great deal about teaching from the files of my talented colleagues. And I have gotten a better sense of the scope of the program and the unique personalities of its classes by teaching two new-to-me classes during my first term as chair, the Kresge Core class (which I began teaching when I moved from Porter to be closer to the Writing Program office) and Writing 20 (to which I assigned myself and others because of an unanticipated surge in need). Both of these classes were for ELWR-unsatisfied students, and I taught both for the first time last year in the midst of a swirl of other activities.

It is also true that chairing has taken an enormous amount of time, especially given the program’s chronic shortage of staff support; this draw on my time has also had its effects on my teaching. A little less time on administrative work and a little more on teaching would have allowed me more chance to refresh my Writing 1/2 course on the Civil War—or, better, finally to retire it and start anew; more time to radically update Writing 203, whose structure and many of whose readings I inherited from two former colleagues; more time to spend on inventing in my classes rather than simply getting through.
Overall, course evaluations for classes during my entire period of employment at UCSC are fairly consistent. While there are variations from class to class, it’s quite apparent that the same teacher has been teaching all the classes, as similar threads run through all the undergraduate classes and a different, but still consistent, series of threads ran through the graduate classes. As I commented extensively on the classes I taught from fall 2000 through spring 2004 in my statement for my last merit review, here I focus mainly on the classes I have taught subsequently.

In Writing 203, graduate students had suggestions for more effective management of the enormous amount of information and course material, but overall approved of the class and, in most cases, felt that it had prepared them to teach first year writing—a gratifying response and one that will serve us well if we develop, as anticipated, a somewhat more robust graduate teaching and mentoring program. In all but one of the Writing 203 classes, I co-taught with another senior faculty member in the Writing Program. This was an excellent experience for me each time, though in one quarter (spring 2004), students discerned a tension between my co-teacher and me that, frankly, did not exist. (The following year, when the same teacher and I co-taught, evaluations of the course praised our teamwork.) Evaluations in this iteration of the class, though on balance appreciative, nevertheless highlighted the aspects of the course that students over the years found needed work: volume of material, demands on students, balance of class time spent on discussion. By contrast, evaluations from Writing 203 for all other years, including the year I taught it on my own, focused on the successes of the class in helping students feel knowledgeable about and ready for teaching first-year writing, with suggestions for improvement visible but clearly a more minor theme. In 2007, a new co-teacher and I introduced a moderately revised reading list and scaled back on some of the previously required assignments, but had a shorter class period available to us, which cut into the amount we could accomplish each week. Another new co-teacher and I have begun further renovations of the course, ones that should update and further reorganize the course based on comments from previous students.

In undergraduate courses, most important, there’s almost universal agreement among the students that the courses they took were writing classes, not courses in the Civil War or art and culture (Porter) or cultural studies (Kresge) or literary forms (Writing 20). There’s general agreement that the courses in some way influenced their “writing or the way [they] think about writing,” as the current Writing Program course evaluations ask, and a number of students comment that they feel in some way prepared for writing they will do in other classes. Most of my Core classes, for Porter and Kresge, have been particularly successful in this regard, though Porter evaluations are a bit crankier about the course itself (Porter’s course structure and focus) than Kresge students. It is
clear that many students find my classes “challenging,” and find me as a teacher
“demanding,” “tough,” and (my favorite) having “high standards.” The tone of
these comments is generally appreciative, of the “she pushed me and I thrived”
variety, but there is also a rueful note: “demanding” and “tough” are not far off of
the minor thread of comments about my “harsh” evaluations of student writing, a
comment I suspect I get not because the comments are in fact mean but
because I make a practice of reflecting back to students where their papers
succeed and falter, and of expecting significant revision. Spending a bit more
time on appreciating students’ achievements, on the one side, and explaining to
students as a group what a typical “Abrams comment” looks like, on the other,
should address this thread.

Though there are some departures from the pattern (Kresge students
found class time invigorating, for instance), several classes found in-class time to
be less compelling than it could have been, and there is a strong enough thread
in a few of the classes about too many balls in the air (too much homework,
sometimes called “busywork,” means that exercises introduced to stage
assignments, practice techniques, or generate content weren’t successfully
communicating their purpose) that I know I will want to scale back, especially in
my next iteration of Writing 2, which I expect to teach next year. There are also
comments about me: some students find me “serious” and sometimes “too
serious,” “formal,” “not approachable” or “intimidating” (though others find me
welcoming and available), and one student, happy with the class, instructs me to
“smile.” I admit to seriousness but worry about the comments about being
intimidating. It goes without saying that I will do my best to be more inviting to all,
and I believe that a shift toward the active analytical use of the personal, such as
what I describe in the first part of the statement, will help: if assignments are
simultaneously rigorous and welcoming, some comments about the individual
classes are worth making. Overall quantitative ratings of my classes in
evaluations that include such ratings are quite consistent, but there are real
variations in the tone of the different sets of evaluations. In the two sets of Writing
1/2 evaluations, for instance, the overall scores are almost identical, but the
winter 2005 class was clearly more successful than the winter 2006 class.
Though they had some reservations about workload and wanted more class
participation (the class met at 8 AM), students found the former class more
invigorating, more compelling, and clearly communicated that they had learned a
lot from the class. Students in the latter class were less satisfied by most
measures, and their dissatisfaction communicated itself in unlikely areas—for
instance, a minor pattern of lower ratings on the question of the instructor’s
preparation and knowledge in the subject. This pattern is surprising given my
long experience with the class, but perhaps less so when I consider the elisions
and shortcuts I no doubt introduced out of overfamiliarity with the course and its
assignments. In 2005 I was still inventing aspects of the class; by contrast, in
2006, I had just about exhausted my willingness to learn more in the context of
Writing about the Civil War. I had reached the limits of my willingness to learn from revision.

A few other comments:

My fall 2004 ratings for Porter Core are weaker than my fall 2005 ratings. One student in the former correctly noticed that I seemed distracted by other responsibilities (it’s true: that was my first quarter as chair), and another commented that I seemed to be learning the course material at the same time they were (also true: that year, Porter changed all of its central texts and a number of its auxiliary readings). By contrast, students in the latter class found the course engaging and effective by most measures, a good introduction to college and to writing. Both classes found seminar time to be less effective than it could have been, and I concur: Porter’s unusual class structure meant that I had only 70 minutes per week with the class as a whole, insufficient time for me to work through a text, introduce writing assignments, and anticipate upcoming events. This is a consistent thread through all my Porter evaluations. Opportunity to have more class time was another reason I jumped to Kresge Core, and students in that class seem to have been noticeably pleased with the quality of class time.

Finally, my Writing 20 class evaluations, while generally solid, clearly demonstrate the challenges of teaching a new course. There is a great deal to work on in this class: the population of students, ELWR students who needed at least a second (and in many cases a third) quarter to satisfy the requirement were familiar to me in ones and twos in my first-quarter college Core courses, but unfamiliar to me as a group. I misjudged the extent to which they needed assignments to be broken down, the extent to which practices of analytical reading and not just writing were what they needed schooling in, the fragility of their self-perception as university-level students. The latter may explain a surprising—to me—ratings dip in some students’ responses to a question about the usefulness of my comments on written work, surprising given that most students also indicated that the course had effectively influenced their writing. (I look forward to having a revised Writing 20 course evaluation analogous to the revised Writing 2 evaluation form; a more detailed set of questions will help illuminate such puzzles.) I have a great deal to work on in teaching this course again, but I look forward to the challenge and appreciate having had the opportunity to learn so close up this critical aspect of the Writing Program’s mission.

I want to comment on one other aspect of my teaching in this review period. A third of my teaching has been in Core classes, where I work closely with a group of colleagues as we endeavor, together, to introduce students to some aspects of university discourse. Another third of my teaching has been
spent co-teaching a course meant to give graduate students, in one quarter, as much of an introduction as possible to pedagogy in general and teaching writing in particular. And one of my new classes, Writing 20, draws a great deal from the generous sharing of one of my Writing Program colleagues. In each of these settings collaboration has been an extraordinarily important element in creating an effective course. Sometimes, as in Writing 203 assignments, the collaboration is evident to students only in the classroom but invisible in the assignments and course materials. In other places, such as Core classes and Writing 20, I have marked my borrowings from other teachers by acknowledging original authorship of course materials. I do this both to model for my students the proper acknowledgment of course materials, and to indicate to them the ways one can make use of such original sources. In almost every case of a “borrowed” assignment, I’ve followed up with an innovation of my own, one that causes students to go one step further in their development. See, for instance, the first formal paper assignment for the Kresge Core course: this introductory assignment, written by a colleague, guides students to specific issues raised in an essay by Stuart Hall, the most challenging reading students did that quarter. My subsequent revision assignment asked students to focus on recreating their papers for a reader by identifying features of a successful “reader-based” paper. My addition simultaneously calls for student revision and revises the original assignment, turning it into a two-stage effort that pointedly distinguishes between getting the ideas out and crafting them into a readable argument for an audience. Such efforts, both independent and collaborative, have been most valuable to me in seeing my teaching as a constant effort in revision, an engine for renewal and productive change.