Learning is dialogic: this is what my students have taught me. And this is what I know will keep me from ever growing bored with “teaching composition.” Every new class is an opportunity for me not just to try out new pedagogical techniques -- every teacher does that -- but to be, literally, a student myself: to be exposed to polyvalences of literacies I didn’t know existed, to learn from a student’s perspective, and to be amazed at the knowledge and energy and potential that these young people bring to this school that remains untapped. I will never tire of helping them – helping us – access this resource, and so long as I am a learner along with them, constantly refining what I think I know, what I think needs to be known, my teaching will never grow stale.

Up until about eighteen months ago, I might have written (indeed, did write) the standard teaching statement, quoting a few theorists and chattering about the importance of incorporating multicultural and interdisciplinary perspectives and of sequencing assignments so that students develop increasingly complex analytical arguments and work in a variety of genres. I would have spoken of my experiments with online peer editing and paper commentary, of my successes in organizing student-run mini-conferences, and of the online discussion forums I have for years integrated with my courses. And I would, most certainly, have spoken of the fun we have in class: the group activities we have and the games we play (language games, detection games, jeopardy-style quiz shows and “battling” in the unit on style, when students try to outdo each other with paragraphs or sentences more descriptive, metaphorical, economical, precise, or vigorous than those of their peers). All of these things have been part of my classes for years, but they’re no longer for me what defines my classes or my own role as a teacher.

A year and a half ago, nine students in a Stevenson Core writing class changed the trajectory of the class, of my teaching, even (forgive the melodrama) of my life. They wanted to apply the Core readings to their lives, to change the way Stevenson Core was taught, to combat the student apathy they saw around them. I gave them free rein – stepped out of their way, really – merely providing them with a two-page handout on how to write a proposal (a version of which is now in my Writing Reader) and encouraging them to interview their provost (their anticipated audience) to anticipate her needs and interests --and waited to see what they might develop on their own. Because they felt able to effect change in their community, their personal investment in the project was great, and they ultimately accomplished far more together than any of them could have done individually (I include a copy of the proposal they produced at Tab 4 of my packet of materials). The following quarter, about half of this group asked to work with me in an “independent study” Writing One, where they more or less set the
curriculum and put into partial practice the service learning component of the Stevenson Core course their proposal had recommended, teaching writing to underserved high school students at local Costanoa High. Of course they learned a lot about writing as they taught it to these students and to each other, but more importantly, they visibly gained a sense of authority and direction in their own thinking as they came up with appropriate readings (about teaching, writing, adolescent psychology, and other topics of interest to apprentice teachers) for the class. I learned from these students how much energy young people are willing to invest and how much they’re capable of teaching themselves if they feel that what they’re learning is useful to them, if they think it can have real effects on real people, if they feel in control of their own educational fates.

That experience led me to substantially totally change my Writing 1/2 pedagogy – though at first it seemed a big risk to abandon a curriculum that had been quite successful (for some years I’d thematically centered my courses on “Popular Culture” because I’d found that the students enjoyed the topic and developed a fruitful sense of ownership in the class). I chose as a theme “Critical Writing, Critical Education” because my Stevenson class taught me that Paulo Freire is right about students best developing critical consciousness when they have the opportunity to interrogate and alter their own lived experience. My goal as a teacher and theirs as writers, I tell them now, is to seek out productive tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities in the texts we read and write and in our own educations and lives, to listen to ongoing intellectual conversations and then – whether the subject of interest to them is a text, a cultural artifact, a situation or issue or event – to locate problems no one else has noticed, to ask questions no one else has asked, to inquire as to what’s being excluded or whose voice isn’t being heard. They learn, thus, to get beyond the easy dichotomies, dispassionate regurgitation of information, or interpretation-in-a-vacuum they may have learned in high school, and instead to be curious and to acknowledge competing values.

In these ways the “thematic” and “writing” components of my course are one, working synergistically together. When I ask my students to critique the positions articulated in a few of the educational debates in our reader, it’s so they can see the possibilities and limits of intellectual argument even as they unpack the historicity of educational practices. When I lay before them examples of various sorts of academic writing, I want them to interrogate the form as much as the content, and to perceive not “rules” so much as “conventions” established for particular ends. I ask them to consider the choices they have in adapting to/interrogating/resisting dominant ways of writing, thinking, and viewing the world, and I remind them that their choices have real material effects (including but not limited to, of course, a grade in my class). I want, in short, to make our work as intellectuals visible to them – including, as we at some point inevitably discuss, how language can operate to exclude, and why many
academics obscure their meaning in arcane language written only for members
of their own inner circle – and to give them the tools with which they can become,
as fully as possible, intellectuals and scholars in their own rights.

As each quarter has progressed in my new writing course, I have
witnessed an interesting transformation: as students develop critical
consciousness, as they come to see knowledge as constructed by social agents
with particular interests, defined and framed in particular ways for particular ends,
they come ,to see themselves as makers rather than merely recipients of
knowledge, able – as were my Stevenson students – to change the way others
think, to tangibly affect their world. My students now determine many of the
course topics, bring readings to the table for mutual consideration, and lend their
own expertise to class discussions and activities; eventually, I hope, I can find
ways to turn more and more of the class over to them – which is to say, to work
more subtly behind the scenes to unearth and nurture their knowledge, so that
they can most effectively teach it to themselves, each other, and me.

This means, of course, not so much teaching a set of rules but nurturing a
sort of metacognitive awareness of the codes by which language operates (and,
as Pierre Bourdieu, Donald Bartholomae, and countless others have noted, the
practices of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion; in the course Reader, texts by
Gloria Anzaldúa, Lisa Delpit, and Fan Shen ask us to attend to such practices
through both their content and their form). My students become analysts of not
just what writing says but what it does rhetorically, of the moves by which it
situates itself in and against certain conversations. For example, students bring
in samples of writing in their discipline and we spend part of one class comparing
the formats and analyzing the language to discern the values and the relationship
with the audience each sample has. Similarly, rather than “teach” MLA or APA. I
present  texts which cite using MLA, APA, and footnotes, let students in groups
determine the divergent rules, and then ask, “What competing values can you
discern?”

In making visible these sorts of rules or the moves of what Gerald Graff
and others call “argument culture,” I increasingly find that my students know more
than I would ever have guessed. I ask them to bring to class “Keepers” from each
reading, and as they share with their classmates what they’ve found most useful
or surprising or worth discussing, others are eager to chime in, to build upon and
go beyond their colleague’s observations. On matters of specific technical
practice, I use a slightly different approach: early in the quarter I ask each student
to identify areas of writing about which he or she feels confidence, and to sign up
to share these strengths, these “Tips,” with the class. After a “Tip” presentation
other students chime in to share what’s worked for them when they feel they’ve
hooked their reader with a strong introduction, created a vivid description, edited
for economy, or whatever the topic of the day is; together the presenters and
their colleagues cover almost everything I might have, and instigate besides interesting debates as to why a particular practice is valued or dismissed.

My classes, then, approach writing as primarily transactional, as a posing and an exploration of a problem or question of interest to others. From their online reader responses to which their classmates respond, to their formal papers which undergo peer review, students learn throughout the course to write their readers into their texts, to create (as cognitive theorists Linda Flower, John Hayes, and John Trimble have all variously put it) “reader-based prose” in order to “achieve desired effects.” I try to teach in much the same way I want my students to write, so that each class is itself a sharing and broaching of ideas, an engagement in intellectual conversation between my students and myself and the texts they or I have brought to the table that opens all of us to new ways of reading and being read.

Numerous studies support that students are better critical thinkers, more efficient problem solvers, and stronger writers if they engage in collaborative rather than merely individualistic or competitive learning (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005), and I can attest that not just my students but I myself think better, write better in conversation with others than any of us could alone. If Emile Durkheim (1922), Lev Vgostsky (1934), Thomas Kuhn (1972), Mikhail Bahktin (1973) and countless social-constructivist theorists since are right that knowledge is communal rather than individual, then my role as an educator is not to transmit knowledge (what Freire called the “banking” concept of education) but to provide what post-Vygotskian educators call “scaffolding” to extend my students’ (and my own) Intermental Development Zones (Mercer 2002). In the specific context of a writing class, this means doing all that I can to enable all of us to comprehend more fully and to manipulate more strategically the specific sociohistorical symbol systems that access credibility and power in our society. Because I believe that Bakhtin is right that “expression organizes experience” rather than the other way around, I see teaching a course that takes expression as its subject as an extraordinarily powerful opportunity and responsibility. If I can expand the expressive strategies students have at their disposal, if I can help them unpack the historicity and interests behind the expression of others – if, in short, expression becomes for them the way into a legitimating community and also the way to change it – then I can, I truly believe, help them change their experience of the world.

Although I warn my students to be skeptical of certainty, I do know at least one place I’m headed next in my trajectory as a teacher-learner: I want to incorporate service learning as an option in my curriculum, as my Stevenson students suggested over a year ago. Whether it’s teaching writing to others or producing a real publication for a community group or a student audience, I want to get my students and myself to extend the work of writing that we do beyond

Arthur 4
the walls of this university. The best writing my students have done thus far is typically for real audiences, and I believe that empowering them – or more precisely, ceasing to impede their producing writing that matters -- is the best thing I can do for my students, my university and my world. I hope to have the opportunity to do this here at UCSC for many years to come.