Teaching Statement
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My teaching over this past review period (1 September 2009—31 August 2012) is a continuation and deepening of the pedagogical strategies I’ve enacted since starting at UCSC in 1998, but it is reflective of a new perspective on the role of first-year writing courses at UCSC. I still help ELWR-unsatisfied students transition to college-level reading, discussion and writing; I still teach students to meet both the demands of their core course while simultaneously fulfilling the composition two requirement; I still teach close reading, responding to texts, ideas, and interpretations in order to develop one’s own ideas, interpretations and ultimately arguments; and I still teach writing as a process that involves a myriad of strategies and steps I have students try out in order to figure out what works best for themselves. I still do this for visiting high schools students, transfer students, and mostly first-year college students, as well as an increasing amount of upper-division students in the majors. What’s changed is my viewpoint: Working with graduate students to develop their own courses, and especially observing those who I mentor, as well as observing my colleagues for personnel reviews has made me acutely aware of my own practices, weak spots, and general presence and role in the classroom and at the university. This has been quite uncomfortable at times but ultimately it’s made me a better instructor, commenter, and lecturer.

The first two years of my review period I continued to teach the graduate seminar, Writing 203, “Teaching Writing,” as the senior instructor (the position rotates with two instructors who have staggered appointments every four years). I really enjoyed this new leadership role as my co-instructor, Amy Weaver, and I continued to refine and develop the course by developing new assignments and a more contemporary curriculum. I find instructing and mentoring graduate students and newer lecturers incredibly invigorating and intellectually fulfilling. Many of the graduate students I worked with are currently teaching their own Writing 2 courses and a number of recent graduates are working for various colleges’ core courses.

An unavoidable tension for graduate students and new lecturers in core courses is the balance between teaching writing skills and teaching the thematic subject of a given course. As an instructor of soon-to-be teachers I have focused on syllabus and assignment design—and how to think through the writing process in any assignment. (Working in core courses I’m much more subtle since I’m not the provost, but I’ve had good luck with refocusing discussions on how to teach a given text, theme or unit through thinking about what types of writing assignments and scaffolding activities make sense.) Thus despite the success of my own “Writing About Hip Hop” course I decided to plan a new course along with the graduate students as both a way to model the process and because I wanted to expand my Writing 2 course to be more interdisciplinary in order to better prepare students for upper-division writing. I wanted a course that could readily engage science, arts, and humanities majors and one that would be more open-ended and flexible each time I taught it. I was able to use the example of thematic writing courses as opposed to
more open-ended ones as a touchstone for graduate students to compare their own courses to.

What I developed over time is a class, intentionally vaguely entitled “The Story,” that is based on the notion of narrative, mostly in the form of long-form journalism, that invites students to follow up by extending and engaging in research to further explore disciplinary aspects of a given “story.” The notion of story is extremely expansive, we explore the “story” of how we see color or dream, for instance, or the coverage of Apple Computer’s contracted labor practices. What is also unique about the course is the texts used. While I have some fairly conventional articles from The New Yorker, New York Times and other established journalism sources, I also have students listen to podcasts of public radio programs such as This American Life, Radio Lab, The Moth, On the Media, and Studio 360. Student response has been overwhelmingly positive and, frankly, for a number of stories circumstances conspired with tremendous luck, as the stories or coverage of them developed while the class covered them. Using engaging podcasts allows the class to become genuinely interested and then, through discussion and my prompting, we “discipline” aspects of a given story and talk about how it’s analyzed in the academy. Also, thanks to the infrastructure eCommons provides I’m able to link to all the podcasts, not to mention the websites of articles. Thus there are no issues with readers or copyrights.

A good example of how my class works is the first assignment— for which I require them to write a personal story. While the personal narrative is a typical introductory assignment that often puts less confident writers at ease (everyone is an expert on themselves) but can challenge accomplished writers (“What’s my thesis statement?”), students hear on The Moth and This American Life (TAL) how personal narratives can be crafted and refined to make a cogent point. The fortunate part is that I had been waiting for an excuse to teach Mike Birbiglia’s excerpt from The Moth (rebroadcast on TAL), “Sleepwalk With Me.” While hilarious in detailing his battles with a sleep disorder that causes him to act out his dreams, Birbiglia is a master at weaving together three dreams and their escalating consequences in a poignant fashion. By closely reading and interpreting the segment I can help push students beyond enjoyment to the deeper structure and meanings. Moreover, it perfectly sets up a personal writing heuristic where students freewrite stories about themselves and revise into their essay. The lucky part is that during the time I was teaching this piece it got developed into a film, so students were able to see previews on-line and get the message that other people are excited about this piece and its development. In other words, it felt like there was a larger conversation about this piece and the form, and there’s some cultural momentum for its development. Students can see the process of developing personal stories into “real-world” writing and many gain quite a bit of confidence and enthusiasm in the process.

Another almost uncanny bit of luck happened with the Mike Daisey controversy on TAL. Daisey, a performance artist, had purported to tour several of Apple Computer’s subcontractors, speak with workers and labor organizers and expose grave injustices in labor practices. However, he was subsequently exposed as a fraud. The result is a tremendously affective hour-long report, a subsequent withdrawal of the story from TAL,
a retraction and interview with Daisey himself, and a rich, nuanced body of reportage and editorializing. Students are able to see both the stories of reportage/performance gone awry and globalization in all their complexity and nuance. Moreover, despite the rather messy nature of the interrelated stories (Dasiey’s and Apple’s) I compiled media coverage, editorials, a labor report (as an example of “gray literature”) and boiled down the issues to two principal paper topics. What I like is the array of issues, from performance art to economic policy, the viability of a range of legitimate positions students can take, and how the assignment grows out of a single podcast into a complex array of phenomena. Furthermore, by having a number of additional articles for students to read the essay assignment is both an analysis and an example of how to focus and compile sources in order to stake a claim using outside sources and interpretation. Thus the assignment serves as a bridge from the personal (which Daisey is firmly an example of in terms of his style, voice, and rhetorical strategies) to independent research (although I don’t have students use academic sources until the actual “investigative” essay assignment). It allows students to learn how to put sources into conversation with each other, learn citation styles while maintaining their voice.

The other parts of the course are a bit more tried and true, but are still firmly rooted in my desire to prepare students to think and write in their disciplines. There’s a story that’s actually about something else—the allegory of the sci-fi film, District Nine, many students really enjoy and find eye opening (it’s an “Ah ha moment” for many students ties into a great podcast on immigration). Many students noted it’s their favorite part of the class. Interpretation that seems far-fetched (to them) supported with more and more unfolding evidence in the form of reviews, ends up being a seminal moment in the course. Students feel like we’ve discovered a hidden meaning. I also require substantial revision and emphasize conferencing more and more (it’s required once for every student and for every non-passing essay draft).

The heart of the second half of the class is an independent research project. Part of my strategy with the frontloaded reading (and listening plus responding to podcasts) is to help students generate the first couple paper projects, work on close reading and engage in the writing process. The other dimension of how all the assignments fit together is that they open up students’ notions of viable projects for academic inquiry. For instance, since many students are Psychology majors the class listens to and reads some psychology oriented texts (“The Psychopath Test” and a New Yorker piece on mental health, “God Knows Where I Am”) to see good examples of psychology related subjects. Thus when it comes time for students to formulate an independent research topic they have a wide range of possibilities and models that relate back to journalism stories and a bit of operative vocabulary to start searching with. Furthermore, I encourage them to pick a topic relevant to their major. One troubling bit of feedback for the investigative essay is that some students didn’t realize they received feedback on a topic proposal, annotated bibliography, prospectus and background report, and draft, all before the final draft investigative research paper was due. This along with some other key parts of the course (making explicit when I’m teaching persuasive arguments, collaboration and editing) will need to be made more explicit in future classes. However, most students found the course valuable and took advantage of the scaffolded approach to have the
process build on each step and go smoothly. Even the students who struggled with the independent topic gained good experience in formulating, researching and drafting papers that require research and synthesis of multiple sources and perspectives to argue an evidenced-based point. In terms of the mechanics of writing such papers I use Davis’ *The Rowman & Littlefield Guide to Writing With Sources* to discuss voice, style, citation systems, and disciplinary differences in depth. For the more nuts and bolts references I use the Online Writing Lab from Purdue University (OWL). This has been really successful. Students appreciate its convenience, breadth, how it’s kept up-to-date and the fact it’s free.

What might not be obvious from my syllabus and course assignments is the degree to which I emphasize learning to write for one’s major. On the surface it can seem like a matter of which citation style to learn (I let students choose according to their proposed major). But it goes deeper—we talk about the kind of questions, language, conceptualizations, investigations and analyses required in different divisions and disciplines while at the same time I emphasize what’s good writing in general. And this emphasis also reaches the scope of my outside service and work with the Writing Program and the program in the majors. Writing for a discipline, both stylistically and conceptually, is a significant component of teaching the Disciplinary Communication [DC] requirement I do for Environmental Studies and American Studies. In terms of the process of research and source integration as chair of the Program Committee on Research we’ve taken up the issue of the purpose of teaching research skills in Writing 2 and held a generative public colloquium. Furthermore, my most recent presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication examined these very issues. This concern comes from helping teach the first of two DC requirement courses for Environmental Studies and a DC course for American Studies. Working with hundreds of upper-division students in the majors has made me really aware of what’s working in Writing 2, what sticks, and what students need. Thus my classes focus on rigorous process and a lot of discussion of the role of Writing 2 in the university. I suspect students might not fully appreciate some of what they’ve learned until they’re in their upper-division courses, but I know they’ve gained skills and confidence to better succeed. Finally, as I continue to work with high school students and as the College Writing Coordinator for Cowell, I bring this perspective to incoming students as well so they are better prepared to succeed at UCSC.