Teaching Statement

September 15, 2012

Dear Review Committee Members,

_We can teach a student to write._ In the process we can teach that same student to dislike writing. As a lecturer in writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I aspire to teach my students to write, and to like writing. I want them to perceive writing as a lifelong, evolving and reciprocal relationship. This is no small task.

Poet and author Sharon Doubiago confessed to me several years ago at the Foothill Writers Conference her reluctance to teach writing in an institution of higher learning, like ours, because she feared that she might unintentionally say or do something that would permanently damage a student writer’s ability to write honestly, from the soul as well as the mind. This is one reason I routinely place myself under the mentorship of established writers, such as Sharon, who conduct their teaching circles with a palpable element of nurturing. These settings remind me of how it feels to expose our intellect and feelings in a setting of complete strangers. I come away from these communities of writers and teachers energized and newly inspired to pass on to my own students the joy in the writing process.

_Hypothalamus-friendly contact zone_

I wrote in my mid-career teaching statement: “When I teach, I begin with the hypothalamus.” Several years later, I remain steadfast in this pedagogical approach to my diverse audience of students. The hypothalamus, that part of the limbic brain functioning as the automatic shut off valve of potential threat, will perceive an unsafe learning situation and override the brain and body. In other words, a threatened hypothalamus can make learning difficult, if not impossible, much as the student might wish otherwise; although people possess disparate degrees of sensitivity, everyone is equipped with this same involuntary limbic mechanism.

I use this learning theory to set the tone by assigning a personal narrative writing assignment at the quarter’s beginning to engage the students and allow them to write about something they intrinsically know and care about – their self and their personal stories about food. Presently, I teach two required writing courses at UCSC: College 8 ELWR Core “Environment and Society” and Writing 2 “The Meaning of Food.” The first assignment I give my College 8 ELWR students asks them to consider their identity as a food consumer while integrating material from Wendell Berry’s essay “The Pleasures of Eating.” I call this assignment a Gastrography, which connects the student in a personal way to the complex issues they will analyze in course readings over the quarter. In my Writing 2 course, we begin by reading contemporary food memoirs as the first step of an assignment that asks students to write their own food memoir and to connect their situations to broader social, political and environmental conversations. These assignments locate students as signifiers of critical public discourses and produce stunning results. One of my students in Winter 2012, as a project for another course, created a website for these memoirs, giving students the choice of telling their stories—several of them immigration stories that had never been told—to a wider audience.¹ As poet Gregory Orr writes, “How badly the world needs words” – theirs.

We teachers need to cultivate students’ meaningful writing as a key to future progress—theirs and society’s—and there is no paucity of grave issues to consider in food. And when we align our teaching to the student’s automatic limbic responses, which food can do through the olfactory system, we tap into emotions, which creates intensity in their writing.
Diversity

Andrea Lunsford puts forth a cautionary note about assigning personal narrative writing in first-year composition classes. Today, she explains, the trend in teaching university writing is away from assigning personal writing and toward research and argument because of modern academic and professional demands (3). This year UCSC will have achieved Hispanic Serving Institution status: forty percent of the entire UCSC undergraduate student body will be Latino in 2012-2013; of the 2012 Frosh, forty percent are Latino. Roughly thirty percent of fall Frosh will be first in the family to attend university. Of the incoming Frosh class of 3,740 students, fifty percent are from underserved high schools.” As we teach composition, inquiry and research we should be worried about “less powerful communities” (Horner 307). Our Writing Program Chair Jim Wilson explained last spring to the Writing Program faculty that these statistics will guide curriculum discussions this year. And they raise the question, what is to be learned from diversity and how can diversity maximize our students’ learning?

These changing demographics at UCSC ask us to apply some of Deirdre Vinyard’s theories when she suggested that universities “harbor a myth of monolingualism, an assumption used to exclude literacies and other languages as subverting.” She championed “recognizing multilingual richness of our country” rather than the monolingual paradigm that “marginalizes and stigmatizes and pathologizes students, separating the important work they do at the academy.” This is why, with one eye to the critical shift that Lunsford mentions and another on all of my students’ psychological comfort, I assign the food memoir/personal narrative at the beginning as an appetizer to approaching the critical skills required in analytical and research assignments. These assignments privilege rather than marginalize home cultures and languages, and germinate a rhetorical stance for the course themes ahead.

Strategies, Structures and Templates

Students are measurably more comfortable when they understand the expectations of their assignments, and their footing is more secure when given strategies and structures to achieve these learning expectations. This is especially true for my ELWR students who generally need much more help on language use and critical skills sets. To that end, I assign formal reading responses, “Reading in Three Different Voices,” adapted from York University’s curriculum by that same title. These are 1-2 page typed papers assigned throughout the quarter. Asking students to read a text three different ways—in the author’s voice, their analytical voice and their personal voice—demystifies the power of a text, and over the duration of the course, students internalize how to summarize and paraphrase, identify main concepts, analyze, look for assumptions and weak arguments, and to problematize their own biases, which frequently pushes awesome ideas to the page. This reading strategy generates substantive pre-essay material, and they go to their essay possessing ideas they can develop, rather than to a blank page.

We all know to the bone the truth in the saying, “Strong critical writing begins with strong critical reading.” So, I spend quite a bit of time complementing these written assignments with tried and true critical reading exercises: freewriting, passage and response; highlighting and marginalia; gutting a text based on John Bean’s “What it says and what it does”, wherein we discuss paragraph by paragraph what the author is saying, what his purpose is and the intentional and unintentional effects on the audience.

As flexible as I am by nature, I believe in teaching structures for composition’s basic parts, such as thesis and paragraphs. I offer metaphors to help them remember the purpose of these parts: the thesis as a road map; the paragraph as an accordion (that compresses and expands depending on purpose and content). Their syllabus as a river trip – vigilantly look downstream, I caution them, to avoid a rapid of three different papers in various stages of production due the same week. This year, I found the templates in They Say, I Say quite helpful to the students for navigating arguments and constructing their own; furthermore, this approach reinforces use of first person point of view, weaving a strand of coherence through the quarter. I teach these strategies, structures, and templates with flexibility in mind, making it clear that these are starting places, not hard and fast rules but negotiable guidelines, and that these structures are absolutely transferable to their future academic coursework.

Student Evaluations

Overall, I am pleased with the scores and comments on my students’ evaluations over the span of six years. Many students checked in their roughly 800 evaluations that the course was “Outstanding” or they “Strongly Agree” that the course effectively taught the spectrum of skills we aspire to teach them. In Spring 2007 Writing 2, twenty-one students scored the course “outstanding.” In this and other courses, their comments often stated that their experience in my classroom was inspiring, one of the best courses they had taken in the university (though
many are first quarter Core Frosh at the time they comment!). Importantly, my ELWR Core students, who demonstrate the need for more individualized teaching of skills sets, repeatedly stressed in their evaluations the generosity and helpfulness of my written feedback and one-on-one meetings.

My written feedback is where a lot of my teaching occurs—in the margins and endnotes of their papers. I make certain the students read my feedback and apply it by assigning an Annotated Revision, which heightens awareness of their weaker patterns and increases internalization of their improvements. Students frequently report they had not realized how many careless mistakes they made in their writing and vow to proofread carefully in the future. This seemingly generic, obsequious statement signals transformation in the student’s “general disposition to make rhetorical decisions” (Brent 589).

In my Writing 64 Journalism course that same quarter, twenty-two out of twenty-three students rated my Writing 64 Journalism course “Outstanding.” A year later, nineteen out of twenty rated the course “Outstanding.” I attribute my effective teaching of journalism to several factors: inheriting Roz Spafford and Conn Hallinan’s reader and Leslie Lopez’s rigorous syllabus; teaching the first two years of this course with my colleague Susan Watrous; and the professional experience as a journalist and reporter that I bring to students who aspire to learn the craft.

My students often remark in their evaluations on the importance of the course content. In some cases, this content has inspired some toward an academic focus and extracurricular involvement. They see themselves as agents of change. On a smaller scale, they remark with enthusiasm about the transformation of their personal food habits when they realize their agency as consumers. These comments underscore how, in a course on Writing, content can motivate students’ learning and engagement in a world that desperately needs them.

These positive critiques affirm that I am doing a lot of things right as a teacher. The more lukewarm scores tell me that I can do better. They spurred the following upgrades in my curriculum:

- Use terminology related to specific skills to help them better understand what they are learning, i.e., “collaboration.”
- More prescriptive (in addition to integrated within an assignment) exercises on the writing process, i.e., “audience,” “reliable sources.” I always teach these skills and usually integrate them into an assignment, but more specific, singular lessons would strengthen learning.
- Tighten scoring of Reading Responses from plus, check, minus to satisfactory (S) or unsatisfactory (U) to push mediocre work to a higher level.
- Maximize “Reading in Three Different Voices” assignments with short student-driven presentations on specific elements of writing.
- Reinforce research skills through online tutorials.
- Maximize learning for the advanced students.

I’m not sure that all of my students understand that when they take home each other’s essays, write a formal letter articulating specific suggestions, and reconvene in their small groups to discuss their papers this is a collaborative strategy to improve their writing/editing and to receive feedback on their evaluations of other students’ writing. Or that they realize the two weeks spent working in panels for the Bi-Annual Food Conference to plan their final research presentations is a collaborative effort to deliver their research to a live audience, elicit questions, and critique each other’s work. Thus, in some areas a stronger meta-cognitive explanation would be useful to help students understand what they are learning.

Although my evaluations have been strong, a few anomalies appeared in my final spring course. I wracked my mind to understand what I had done differently in that particular class: Is a required writing course scheduled at night at the very end of a rigorous academic year a petri dish of Negativity? Am I the burnt-out, grumpy one? These questions spurred at least one early morning walk on the beach with a strong cup of coffee. They also raised several questions, which I believe are appropriate for faculty discussion. For one, how do we effectively teach research when our present library instruction is in danger of budget cuts and library staff reductions? I always
follow up our library research session with writing workshops on how to effectively use sources gleaned from the University library databases to build a paper. I schedule meetings with students who are having difficulty finding research and work one-on-one with them on the computer to find sources. Over the summer, I reviewed online research tutorials, and in the process I have become an advocate of high quality online research tutorials that are accessible to the students throughout their Writing 2 quarter and that also reinforce specific skills we teach in the classroom, such as finding multiple views, assessing source reliability, navigating multiple data bases and subject fields. Integrating library tutorials would also help College 8 Core students find and use sources for their Field Investigation Project.

And, finally, how do we maximize learning for our advanced students while teaching undergraduates who struggle to achieve competence? Roxi Hamilton raised this same question to Deirdre Vinyard when she spoke of the pressing need to value multiple literacies. Perhaps this is an existential question. Perhaps one answer is letting the student know she needs to play an integral part in finding, or asking for help in finding, her highest level and not wait to be shown. And perhaps I/we can help this mature student by starting with the reality of the classroom and that question: what do we learn from diversity that aids our transformation into a pluralistic society? On a practical level, this reminder is not to stop at praising the student, but to direct the student who excels to an even keener intellectual level.

**Student Awards: Rothman & TWANAS**

The clutch of awards and scholarships I have received has tapered off and my students are beginning to win their own. Kerianne Doi, a freshman in my 2010 Writing 2 course, received a Don Rothman Writing Award for an outstanding essay she generated in that course. At the Awards Ceremony, she read a touching letter of acceptance, complimenting my support of her writing (see file). One student, a Frosh when I had the pleasure of teaching her in Writing 64 (journalism), last year received a full five-year scholarship to Harvard, where she begins this fall. I remained involved in her journalism after she took responsibility for TWANAS (Third World and Native American Student Collaborative Press) and I accepted TWANAS’ request to co-sponsor the paper with Lecturer and Student Print Advisor Susan Watrous. Another student, who moved up to take this young woman’s place, and for whom I wrote a letter of recommendation, was this year awarded a substantive offer from Medill College of Journalism at Northwestern.

Because of these students’ work, Susan Watrous and I submitted a letter nominating TWANAS for the Chancellor’s Achievement Award for Diversity in 2011. They won! This year TWANAS received several state awards for journalism. Our role as co-sponsors to support their ambition to give voice to underrepresented communities has been rewarding, to say the least.

As for taking credit for students’ successes, I quote Susan, who said, “endeavoring to measure one’s success presents an interesting conundrum: What credit can we take for students’ achievements? ... One simple answer to the question is, we should take very little credit.” As teachers, though, we admit that these flashes of brilliance reflect our pedagogical excellence as we celebrate with them and bask in the generous tributes they pay us.

**Stance**

Today, I devote most of my writing to fiction and poetry. Central to my present writing are farming and food. This focus extends to many areas of my life: I can be seen at the Farmers Markets on weekends, behind the cash register at my son’s organic produce tents or grading papers at an adjacent food table stall (where I sometimes meet my students). This year, I was appointed the Vice President of the UCSC Farm and Garden board of directors, which supports the UCSC apprenticeship program. I am presently advocating for one UCSC alumna, my former Writing 2 student, who is applying for this competitive program. This fall I will present my paper based on teaching food memoir, titled “When the subject of memoir is food: a savory second course in academic writing,” to the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association conference on a panels with a Writing Program colleague. These activities have created a whisper of a reputation about me as a teacher who is passionate about the present food movement. Because of this, a student from my Spring Writing 2 class invited me to speak on the “local food activism” panel at College 10’s Tenth Annual Practical Activism Conference, where Angela Davis will be the keynote speaker. What an honor. And what an opportunity to further the integration of teaching, writing and serving the UCSC community.
I believe I am an excellent teacher. I also believe in the adage that educators do not come forth fully formed; rather, we are cultivated. I continue to grow as I continue to evolve my students' abilities. I especially cherish their testimonies about writing:

"This course taught me I can write enthusiastically about a topic I'm passionate about, even though I do not consider myself a writer."

"I have always struggled with writing and therefore disliked writing, but Ms. Somers helped me enjoy writing."

"This class helped me enjoy writing again and the beauty and power it holds."

I want students to be passionate about entering the world through their writing and to find the beauty and power in their own voices. I want them to regard the word as their ally.

How badly the world needs words.
Don't be fooled
By how green it is,
How it seems to be thriving.
- Gregory Orr

Very Sincerely,

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Works Cited


Notes

i See www.meaningoffood.com for student memoirs.

ii Statistics from Admissions Director Michael McCawley and VPDUE Richard Huey, qtd. by Jim Wilson at our June faculty meeting.

iii This link between diversity and challenge rose from a conversation with Don Roth @ Lulu’s on Sept. 11, 2012.