

## Personal Philosophy for Teaching Writing

I can summarize my motive for teaching writing in three sentences:

My desire to teach writing is based on a strong desire to do my part to ensure that more people become able to transfer their thoughts and experiences into words so that society can learn and benefit from individuals' truths. Frank testimony is our best lens on what it means to be fully human; but that testimony must first be spoken or written before it can influence others. I thus want to help students to develop skills to progress as thinkers and writers.

But there is much more to say about writing and the importance of understanding creativity and its role in writing. I believe teaching writing is both an art and a science, so my evolving pedagogy draws from numerous writing experts who came before me and who influence my work. Educator Roger Simon wrote, "To propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision, a dream for ourselves, our children, and our communities." Simon captures the concepts of "vision" and "dream" as it relates to how to approach teaching writing. These and many other factors inform the philosophy that I am in the journey of developing as I think about facing a classroom of people who may be challenged by how to transfer their ideas into words on paper. It challenges me to be in a position of casting a vision of success for writers, or connecting with the dreams entertained by students. My personal background and experiences as a professional writer, mixed with ongoing observations in graduate composition studies and undergraduate classrooms, all inform my choice to create a classroom that fosters students' development of a healthy, creative self in a classroom environment that encourages critical thinking and creative expression.

I've become a strong believer in the importance of kindling creativity in student writers and believe that meanings are shaped by social experiences. While my primary teaching approach will be as a social constructivist, I will draw best practices from expressivist, current-traditional, and cognitivist methods when needed, depending on who is filling the seats of my classroom. Using

rhetorical power as a writing instructor must be done with the goal of helping students develop writing abilities that enable them to argue, to challenge, to defend, and to support academic inquiry, and what they believe is right.

My personal philosophy for teaching writing unfolds here as I explain the various influences that have shaped my philosophy and discuss why I believe students' writing ability is so influenced by freedom of creativity.

### **Graduate Studies and Professional Writing Experiences**

Determined to transition from freelance writer to gaining a spot in the field of teaching writing at college level, I enrolled in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing (MAPW) degree program at Kennesaw State University in 2009. My entry into the MAPW had been spurred on by the non-fiction book and articles I had already published, and by the other three book contracts I had acquired. Though I had managed to earn a part-time living as a writer over the past five years, specializing in applied writing such as web copy, news and feature stories, and public relations writing for businesses, I desired a more solid position in writing. I wanted to move into a discourse community of writers and scholars and greatly advance my writing abilities toward teaching, research, and publication of my works.

My undergraduate work as a Communication major had centered on classes in writing for media and public relations, with a supporting interest in sociology and cultic studies. In my undergraduate studies, several "Writing for Public Communication" course projects had opened doors for me as a freelance writer that I discovered were not that difficult to find with a little initiative and courage. While I believed anyone who wanted to write could do this, I observed some but not all fellow students in my classes moving forward in their writing with confidence. I began to shape a personal philosophy that everyone who enters college has the ability to communicate through oral and written expression and will find themselves somewhere on the

continuum of “poor” to “good” writer depending upon the degree to which they have cultivated an ability to transfer ideas to written words. Was this ability based on creativity that was innate, or could it be cultivated? Could writing be taught, or was it an innate talent? What else influenced a student’s ability to write? I wanted to know.

As I moved through classes with students of varying economic backgrounds, gender, race, age, cultural exposure, religious and political affiliations, and technological savvy, I became increasingly observant these various factors seemed to affect a student’s ability to convert ideas into words, whether orally or written. More importantly, I became increasingly aware that these and other factors could affect a student’s ability to even form original ideas, creative expressions, and personal opinions, much less retain information learned academically and through life experiences.

### **Cultural Influences in Creative Abilities**

While studying research methods and theory in mass communication and sociology as an undergraduate and in composition studies as a graduate student, I developed a growing interest in interpreting the effects of contemporary cultural issues, particularly those of cults, unhealthy relationships, and situations of people being under coercive control, on students’ literacies and creative expression, particularly writing abilities. My initial interest in this stemmed from the effects of my nearly two decades in an unhealthy religious group (a cult) where the leadership used its power over the members to obscure their self-identity and suppress any sense of personal creativity. Within this hegemony, the only right thoughts and expressions were those of the leaders, and members created few original thoughts.

In my mid-adult life, I had successfully transitioned (not without tremendous challenges) from that group and rebuilt my life, due to the resurgence of my creative self once free of the former oppressive group tactics. “Creativity,” particularly in the presence of coercive control, has

become the subject of my research and writing, including my published journal article, "Creativity and Cults from Sociological and Communication Perspectives: The Processes Involved in the Birth of a Secret Creative Self," in the *Cultic Studies Review* (Boeri and Pressley, summer 2010). In it, we argue that it is essential to understand creativity before understanding its role in personal expression.

Basic dictionaries describe "creativity" as "the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc; originality, progressiveness, or imagination." Building on the "power" aspect of this definition as the core of our aforementioned article, Boeri and I define creativity as, "a free expression of thought (i.e. feelings, emotions, and/or philosophies) that originates from the freedom to think with minimal restraints from the social environment." Since complete freedom of thought is impossible--we're always influenced by some outside force, rule, or message--it is more useful to think of creativity along a continuum of power "dynamics" or power play between leaders and followers, or instructors and students. This can range from complete freedom of thought in an unconstrained environment on one end, to total restriction of thought within unhealthy relationships on the other end.

The work of educator and author, Mihaly Csikszentmihayi (pronounced "cheek-sent-me-hay-ee") aligns with our ideas. He says that creativity is partially dependent on recognition of and acceptance by those who assign value to one's creativity. For example, in a writing classroom, if a student has an idea but someone (the instructor or a peer) suppresses it, the student could make a wrong conclusion that her/his idea is bad or doesn't work, or even that he/she is not creative and shouldn't waste time trying to write. In a college setting, students can feel powerless to express creative thoughts while believing they must choose words that fulfill what their instructors want to hear in order to get a high grade. Ideas about the power dynamics of classrooms, and the belief I

have in creativity as an important element that must be present for students to develop into better writers, have shaped my reasons for wanting to teach.

### **Why I Want to Teach Writing**

Through my study of composition, communication, and sociological theory of the effects of social circumstances on self-identity, I have been able to make even more sense of the ways of my oppressive (former) group, and its squelching effects on my creativity and overall sense of self. My desire to teach writing is based on a strong desire to do my part to ensure that more people in this world become able to transfer their thoughts and experiences into words so that society can learn and benefit from individuals' truths. Frank testimony is our best lens on what it means to be fully human; but that testimony must first be spoken or written before it can influence others. I thus want to help students to develop skills they already have in order to progress as writers and thinkers. My interest is in teaching practical writing that can help college students to not only write good academic essays, but to write in ways that would enable them to develop an active and successful position in their chosen field.

I know that along with teaching writing comes the power inherent in a teacher's position in the classroom. I take that power seriously and with kid gloves. Patricia Bizzell challenged writing instructors with the question, "How can we use rhetorical power to effect democratic change?" (1992). I align with KSU Professor Todd Harper's answer to Bizzell's question that he gave during my class presentation on critical pedagogy (Feb. 2010) where he said he was committed to using rhetorical power to effect democratic change by: 1) teaching a critical analysis of language; and 2) teaching students to make an argument with evidence, using timeless principles of rhetoric. My alignment with his statement comes from my alignment with aspects of critical pedagogy (due to my background in an oppressive group and understanding the effects of misapplied power). I'll use my rhetorical power by investing my teaching efforts in enabling

students to see themselves as world changers, and advocates of equal rights. This view supports what I believe to be the role of writing in academic institutions.

### **The role of writing in the university**

Teaching writing should be done with full status as a academic subject, done with craft and grace, and not sublimated to a skill only needed as a general education course in order to progress in academics. I champion writing's rich relationship with intellectual inquiry and cannot separate it from the heart of the curriculum. Many of my ideas about writing are informed by Mike Rose, who believes that writing demands active and even struggling engagement with the facts and principles of the discipline a student is writing within, as well as encounters with the discipline's texts. Students must incorporate facts, principles, and texts into their own work, and frame their knowledge within the myriad conventions that help define a discipline. They also must persuade others that their knowledge is legitimate. While being literary and rhetorical in its focus, I would hope that the way I teach writing also honors the cognitive, the emotional, and the situational dimensions of language.

My position on diversity, Englishes, and literacies will also influence how I teach writing.

### **Diversity**

Educators Paulo Freire and bell hooks have influenced my sense that how I teach (my assumptions and my actions) will reflect the extent to which I accommodate diversity. I do not believe that there is a culture-free or culture-neutral teaching methodology. The challenges that diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, economics, religion, literacy levels, and groups to which I do not natively belong, brings to a classroom will be an issue of interest and exploration versus a barrier. I hope to shape my classroom paradigm on the students in front of me versus some "ideal" mainstream student who bears little resemblance to the students who occupy my classroom. One single ethnic group is not likely to constitute the class or to determine the assignments I create;

instead, the students are likely to be of various ethnic groups that have been traditionally underrepresented and will influence the assignment plans. Students will be encouraged to explore the culture that they bring to the classroom; I believe their culture can have a profound influence on their in-class behavior. I see this as a pool from which to draw ideas and thoughts from that can be used to contrast and compare with new information being learned. This may demand added flexibility from me when planning assignments. Informing work: *Literacy Across Communities* (Moss, 1994).

### **Englishes**

Janet Emig and Mina Shaughnessy have influenced my ideas about “correctness” and “errors” when it comes to “proper English.” While my teaching framework will be built on *standard English*, I believe it is sometimes effective to approach English instruction as “appropriate” rather than as “correct.” Moss and Walters also differentiate between *prescriptive standard* (English handbook style), and *descriptive standard* (the American English used by people with social, political, and economic power and influence; the variety taught to native and non-native speakers of English and also used in most media in spoken and written form). The *descriptive standard* lets go of rules that tend to marginalize students in writing classes, and accommodates the ever-increasing number of students entering college who bring with them the English of their culture, especially ESL students.

I am committed to personally building an ongoing, rich understanding and awareness of Englishes so I can guide students to use written language effectively. I adopt Mina Shaughnessy’s philosophy (which is also supported by writing educators Mike Rose, David Bartholomae, and Patricia Bizzell) that even the most error-ridden prose arises from the confrontation of inexperienced student writers with the complex linguistic and rhetorical expectations of the academy. As Shaughnessy says, to properly teach writing is to understand the intelligence of their

mistakes. Teaching this way will require me to display the art of interpreting errors rather than circling them or marginalizing students because of them, and to guide these students, gradually and with wisdom, to be more capable participants within the academic discourse community and conventions. I choose this over a remedial model, because I see writing as a process that is transitional and socializing rather than as a corrective, mechanistic focus on error.

### **Literacies**

David Bartholomae orients me to the idea that college students are trying to enter the academic discourse community of the university, and so, by writing essays for topics to which they are not yet oriented, have to create the university in everything they do. Students as well as instructors are challenged by the demand to not only acquire knowledge (content) but to display that knowledge in technological packages that are acceptable by contemporary standards. This surpasses the minimum literacies of reading and writing in Standard English; it extends into a wide world of computer savvyness, from gaming to software, hardware, mobile devices, and social networking media. I do believe I need to teach writing using best practices of the current-traditional method, but along with styles and forms suitable for contemporary expression, whether that be for research papers, desktop publishing, web copy, blogs, or the like. I will never allow myself to become the type of professor that I wouldn't want to hire for lack of technological know-how. I'm committed to keeping current in my personal training in contemporary technologies, from word processing and presentation programs to my abilities using a variety of social media technologies and devices.

Literacies, diversity, Englishes and the multicultural aspects of the classroom are all synthesized into my English 1102 syllabus.

### **Teaching English 1102**

My current syllabus is themed “The Secrets of Style” with the goal of engaging all students in discourse about the self, creativity, and developing a writing style. The course is a social constructionist approach to teaching writing, as exemplified in all readings, group discussions and peer reviews, videos, and writing exercises. The course purpose is to help the student develop critical thinking and writing skills that will form the foundation of their future explorations in learning and in academic writing from sources. They will focus on writing as a process that is influenced by social circumstances that they will discover through their readings, viewings, and discussions.

I emphasize creativity inherent in the writing process which calls not for just writing an academic essay to fulfill an assignment, but to write an essay because the student has discovered a unique solution to a genuine problem and, in the spirit of creativity and intellectual discourse, they will experiment with ideas and take intellectual risks.

- Karen Pressley