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Teaching Philosophy Statement

"I don't understand what I'm supposed to be doing," I said to Dr. Burns plaintively. "Excellent," he responded with a grin and a flourish. "Not knowing what you are doing is a wonderful thing!" I felt my brow crease in a spasm of anger and frustration, and filed his response away in my mind under "Things I Will Never Say When I Teach."

Imagine my surprise when I found myself sitting at my desk recently, conferencing with a student who was saying to me that he simply did not understand the assignment, and had no idea what he was supposed to be doing. "Wonderful!" I cried. "You're on the right track!" In teaching, much like parenting, I am amused to note, our words can frequently return to mock us mercilessly.

Not understanding an assignment is an exciting position in which to find oneself. If, that is, you are confident enough in your own abilities that you know understanding will eventually arrive. This was frustrating to me as a student, when I did not have that confidence, and as an instructor, when I felt similarly lost and casting about, it was frightening as well.

Times like these are huge opportunities, and I understand more clearly now what Dr. Burns was telling me years ago. Not having a pre-determined and pre-tested response means that there is great opportunity for learning and growth, and I see these times now as true opportunities, not failures. I see my teaching philosophy as one of possibility and opportunity, rather than that of the well-traveled, pre-packaged, pre-tested approach.

At one point I felt that I had two philosophies: one for the day-to-day living in the classroom and another one that functions only within the perfect classroom, where I never blindly react, but instead always have thoughtful, well-reasoned responses to any issues that come up. Earlier in my career, I wanted to revise my thinking so that I could do the impossible: bring the reality of the second, perfect classroom into place. However, I am coming to see that that utopia is not really where I want to end up. As I tell my students, writing is messy, and sometimes teaching is, too.

When we approach the classroom as a place of learning for ourselves as well as our students, wonderful things can happen. When I began teaching, I wished for the magical moment to arrive when I was a "real" teacher, when I knew all the answers, when it was easy and I was never surprised. What a boring job that would be, and what a loss my students would suffer if I thought I knew everything and there was nothing left for me to learn. My teaching philosophy places me squarely into the camp of the "life-long learner," and I no longer see the admission that I do not know something as a failure.

As I have gained more experience, I have come to understand a bit better the assignment called "instructor." I no longer see my task as one that involves smoothing the way for my students and making their tasks easier. A good teacher provides tools to help the student re-see the problem facing her, and imagine new possibilities for solving that problem, as

opposed to handing the student a road map of the “right” way to go. Imagine all the lost possibilities if we were never offered the opportunity to break away and attempt something new. Students need to be required to navigate the difficulties of the classroom requirements I put into place, because until they do, they won’t know what they are capable of creating. There is a reason for the assignments that we give students, and the decision making processes that those assignments require. My job is not to ensure the happiness of my students, but instead to present them with opportunities for growth. My job is not to “fix” things for them – my job is to place requirements before them and allow them to choose their own best method of approach to meeting those requirements and, in the process, learn more about their own processes of learning, writing, and thinking.

I believe that a good, successful teacher makes herself obsolete, and it has always been my desire that students would leave my class no longer needing me because they now have all the tools they need to find whatever answers they are looking for. I intend that students in my classes learn to think critically, which is less an exercise in thinking and more an exercise in habitually questioning. I want to foster in my students a willingness to question, an ability to engage in critical doubt versus blind willingness to believe anything they are told. I want them to find themselves in places where they are not certain of the outcome, where the end result is not predetermined or obvious.

As I work with students on the invention for their topics, their research for their papers, or on the revising and editing of their papers, I provide options for them to try out – various methods of invention, or ways to re-see their papers to make revision smoother. In the process, I make clear to them that not all of these are going to be successful or helpful, but that as they become aware of what works for them, they can become more mindful of these strategies and work to strengthen them and change them to better suit their needs. But at all times, I try to make it clear to them that their work is what earns their grade in my class, and that this is entirely their work, not mine.

Just as I see my vita as something I must continually update, I also see my teaching philosophy as something constantly in a state of revision – both the physical document itself as well as the more amorphous concept itself. Each day that I enter the classroom, I anticipate, hope, and welcome challenges from students that will cause me to pause and reflect on the way I do things as a teacher. I see my philosophy as something I carry with me and revise constantly, both after great reflective thought as well as immediately and on the fly. My philosophy changes from day to day, and from class to class, but the basics remain the same – I want my students to learn not only good writing skills, but also that writing is more than just something resulting in a nicely formatted MLA paper. Writing is also a process by which we come to a clearer understanding of our own beliefs, or a messy and protracted process which helps us to move past previously held beliefs, or a process by which we come to a decision. Writing is much more than just the papers we turn out – it’s an exploratory act, an act of discovery and wonder. Not knowing where that exploration will take us is what makes teaching so exciting and full of promise for me.