David Bedsole Teaching Statement

Knowledge has a half-life. One theorist, Cathy Gonzalez, explains, "Half of what is known today was not known 10 years ago. The amount of knowledge in the world has doubled in the past 10 years and is doubling every 18 months…"[1] In the same way, what was known yesterday can tomorrow turn out to be incomplete or false. How, then, do we prepare students for this rapidly shifting world?

One answer is that students need to learn how to learn, and a learning philosophy known as *connectivism*[2] seeks to account for the shifting nature of knowledge and expertise in a networked, technologically enriched society. Learning is actionable knowledge, and the learning process is often about establishing, organizing, and managing connections to *nodes*, which are people and other sources of information. I find this theory compelling, but additionally, I think that certain sturdy habits of mind, like curiosity, risk-taking, openness to learning from failure, creativity, and questioning can be taught in class alongside concepts that may change tomorrow. And some of those skills and habits of mind can be gained through study of the humanities, like rhetoric. Writes George Anders:

> Curiosity, creativity, and empathy aren't unruly traits that must be reined in to ensure success. Just the opposite. The human touch has never been more essential in the workplace than it is today. You don't have to mask your true identity to get paid for your strengths. You don't need to apologize for the supposedly impractical classes you took in college or the so-called soft skills you have acquired. The job market is quietly creating thousands of openings a week for people who can bring a humanist's grace to our rapidly evolving high-tech future.[3]

I encourage my students to learn independently, even if it challenges my expertise—it reminds them that learning can be muddy, and is often negotiated, even among experts. Indeed, teachers can be subject matter experts, but also designers of learning experiences, mentors, coaches, and provocateurs. Sometimes all of the above. As a teacher, I try to be ***relational***, ***knowledgeable*** in my area, ***deliberate*** in goals and yet ***flexible*** and even ***playful*** in achieving outcomes.

I have come to deeply believe that teaching is primarily ***relational***: as educators, we earn the right to teach students by demonstrating care for the whole person. This is why my dissertation focuses on the use of music in the writing classroom as a way to promote academic hospitality and make room for diverse voices in writing pedagogy. As an instructor, it is my job to study my students: their cultures, values, background knowledge, and challenges in order to best teach them.

But of course, I also have to study my subject area: teachers must be ***knowledgeable***. Teaching drives research, and research drives teaching: my students raise questions and concerns that push me back into study, while research and study inspires me with new content and pedagogical approaches to bring back to my students.

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[1] Gonzalez, C. (2004). The role of blended learning in the world of technology. *Benchmarks Online*, September 4.

[2] Siemens, G. (2005b). Connectivism: a learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology & Distance Learning*, January.

[3] Anders, G. (2019). *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a "Useless" Liberal Arts Education* (Reprint ed.). Back Bay Books.

Additionally, I am inspired by my field, rhetoric and composition, which has fought for disciplinarity in English departments and is now rightly recognized as a content area. Instead of suffering from what Richard Fulkerson[4] calls "content envy," I affirm that writing courses *have* content: The subject matter of writing courses is writing.

I strive to be ***deliberate*** in my teaching. By that, I mean that I try not to waste my students' time, but to always use whatever resources are available—mostly attention and time—to create the most learning value for the student. College is expensive, and students should get their money's worth, so my teaching always tries to balance theory *and* practice. Without theory, practice is merely local lore—something has worked before, but we're not sure why. But without practice, theory has no legs. The best pedagogy, in my experience, marries both: we discuss genre theory, but we also learn to use Track Changes in Word. We analyze rhetorical velocity, but we also post content in WordPress. We seek to become reflective practitioners.

I also look for opportunities to partner with practitioners in applied learning situations. While at King University, my technical communication classes did several client-based projects, and now, at Alabama, I partner with iFixit.com so students can gain some experience with practitioners outside of the academy. These relationships between the private sector and academia are critical, especially in applied fields such as technical and professional writing. And I try to help my students position themselves as emerging professionals through the use of professional portfolios.

Flexibility means that subject matter will lend itself to some strategies rather than others. For instance, if we are discussing technical writing ethics, having students take positions on case studies and debate them would make sense. If we are discussing style guides, having students study examples of style guides, and then collaboratively generate one for the class would make sense. I also think about whether I'm varying the strategies enough to hold student interest. Class should require something of students; they should not be able to successfully sleep through it without being asked to do something.

Yet even in professional courses like technical writing, I find that directed ***play*** in the classroom is a way to engage students in learning. At the beginning of my technical writing courses, I have my students build something with Legos, document it, then conduct a quick user test of those instructions with another group. This quickly introduces them to the messy, recursive nature of the writing process, while providing an ice-breaking play experience. Sometimes I model revision by playing one of my original songs on the guitar or banjo, and then showing feedback I got from Nashville songwriting pros, and then discussing how I would incorporate it. I once taught a technical writing course based on designing a tabletop board game—the instructions for such a game are a great way to learn procedural writing. And since college, especially during this pandemic, often doesn't feel very hospitable to students, I always begin my class meetings with new music playing; this provides me with opportunities to connect with students and extend academic hospitality.

We are in an exciting moment in higher educational history. While many (rightly) question the high cost of college, and others (understandably) question the value of a college education, we are learning that certain skills and habits of mind tend to have lasting value. Knowledge has a half-life, but not all knowledge is created equal. Writing can be taught, and habits of mind can be modeled, and it is those things that I seek to teach in my courses.

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[4] Fulkerson, R. (2005). Composition at the turn of the twenty-first century. *College Composition and Communication*, 56, 654-687.