**7. Philosophy of Teaching**

Writing scholar and teacher Nancy Sommers writes, “With writing and with teaching, as well as with love, we don’t know how the sentence will begin and, rarely ever, how it will end. Having the courage to live with uncertainty, ambiguity, even doubt, we can walk into all of those fields of writing, knowing that we will find volumes upon volumes bidding usenter” (428). I’ve been thinking a lot lately about how I can help students face that “uncertainty, ambiguity, even doubt” that Sommers highlights. The world can seem to preclude such notions, encouraging students to never be wrong—or at least never admit it—and to elevate some “facts” over others based not on reasoning or evidence but rather preexisting points-of-view. I want my classroom, then, to be a space where students can start to become comfortable with uncertainty and even failure.

This starts with modeling ambiguity and ambivalence in my own thinking to demonstrate that there is not a singular way to think, read, or write. Rather than see the texts we read and write about as unassailable authorities, I want students to test what authors say against their own experiences and see their work as jumping off points. I remind them, too, that changing your mind can be a sign of learning as opposed to flimsy convictions. When it comes to writing itself, what can seem like the “right” way to go about something is often a limiting construct. In the case of writing and language, in particular, such constructed notions often grow out of histories of subjugation and marginalization that continue to advantage some identities, groups, and languages over others. I share with students work by translingual scholars like Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur, who encourage “reading with patience, respect for perceived differences within and across languages, and an attitude of deliberative inquiry,” remembering that “deviations from dominant expectations need not be errors; that conformity need not be automatically advisable; and that writers’ purposes and readers’ conventional expectations are neither fixed nor unified” (304). These kinds of ideas tend to surprise students, who have so often been acculturated through their schooling to look for the single, correct solution. But I think that’s all the more reason to create space in a writing classroom to sit with, test, and reflect on different perspectives. I want my students to see the value of letting go of fixed assumptions about writing and instead embrace uncertainty. Uncertainty leads to inquiry, which leads to learning and, sometimes, new knowledge that can then be shared with others.

When I say I want to expose my students to failure, I’m not referring to their transcripts. Instead, I want my students to know that failure is as much a part of life—and especially writing and learning—as success is. It’s just not as celebrated. I tell my students that writing is hard, and that I struggle with writing, and so does every writer I know (with “writer” here meaning simply any person who writes, no matter what form that writing takes). But failure isn’t a chronic condition. It’s a temporary state on the way to achieving something more than we previously thought possible. Responding to a student’s writing, then, means more than reading it to find and explain what’s wrong or could be better. Instead, feedback is a conversation involving the writer, classmates, and myself where we can all work together to help the writer figure out how to improve the piece in ways that respect the writer’s intentionality and design. That means giving students plenty of opportunities to test out strategies and ideas, assess how things went, and then revise. Students in my classes are encouraged to revise their writing as much and as often as they’d like to continue developing and working out their ideas. This process makes student growth and learning throughout the semester explicit, and my students frequently comment on the development they see in their writing. Typical comments on end-of-semester surveys include statements like, “The course had many revision opportunities, which really fosters a comfortable environment that is very conducive to learning and growth, not just satisfying an assignment,” and, “I really liked how feedback was given in the course. I never considered myself that great of a writer but I found that after taking into account the feedback from Professor Bryan and my peers, my writing has improved significantly.”

If I’ve learned anything in my years writing and teaching, it’s that writing is not some innate ability you either have or you don’t. What distinguishes the persistent writers I know is an acceptance and even embrace of failure as part of the process, an understanding that there is always more than one right way to do something, and a real curiosity about languages, the ideas of others, and the writing process itself. Students won’t leave my class ready to write in every situation they might encounter—that’s not possible in a single semester. Instead, I want them to leave feeling like writers who can fail, who can learn, who can keep going, and, in doing so, become exactly the writers they want to be.

**Works Cited**

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