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Teaching Statement

After a difficult day of teaching, a colleague of mine reminded me why it is that we do this thing we do. “I always try to remember to teach out of love,” he said. As I step into the classroom or begin a lesson plan, I try to remember his words and create a space where students can become writers, readers, and thinkers. If I can give them this space, teaching becomes joy rather than work.

As an instructor of writing, I have two main goals. The first is that my students develop critical thinking skills. Students entering a college composition course are usually new to the university and are in the painful process of defining themselves as students and citizens. If they have examined the worldviews of parents or other influential adults at all, students may merely be defining themselves as Other: they don't know what or who they are, but they are certainly not their parents. In my classroom, I provide a safe, yet challenging environment where students' undigested ideas may be discussed, dissected, and understood. It is my hope that a student leaving my composition classroom will have learned to see the world in a more nuanced manner than he or she did at the start of the semester, understanding a variety of positions rather than clinging to dualistic ideals of right and wrong.

Second, I would like them to be able to express their views through compelling, purposeful writing that utilizes their own unique skills and values. Any instructor of writing is aware that each student is different: no amount of desperate clinging to the day's lesson plan will change that. As an auditory-kinesthetic learner, I secretly loved reading aloud in my undergraduate Chaucer class, because that was the only way I could learn the material; in graduate school, I internalized writing theory by testing it through frequent, experimental, low-stakes writing. I try to offer these types of experiences to my students so they can discover how they learn and apply those lessons to their experience of college-level writing. Most students come into my classroom with a very limited idea of what writing is and what it can do for them, so I try to give them tools to make writing a part of their lives. There are, of course, basic skills that translate well across a variety of rhetorical contexts, but typically, once students leave academia, they have little use for the five-paragraph essay or the stereotypical college research paper. As students typically respond better when working from a point of success and confidence in their own authority, I prefer to use the tools students already know how to use to achieve course objectives. Often, it's a challenge to keep up with them. This summer, I took a myriad of training classes on everything from the educational use of blogs to podcasting so that I can give my students as many opportunities as possible to put their words out into the world and watch them reshape reality. I like students to write for a variety of audiences in areas that interest them, so that they can see the uses of writing beyond this particular class. For example, at the same time students are writing a research paper, they may also be contributing to a discussion group about how the process is going and posting to a blog about favorite pieces of writing, emphasizing writing's the reflexive nature.

To accomplish both of these goals, the most important thing a student can do is write: about what they have read, about what they have written, about what it was like to have written. Once they

write, I have them write again, and this time, make it better, make it more. It is important for students to learn writing as a process, something that they can improve upon but never fully master. During this process, I start to emphasize the importance of audience. Ultimately, what do I want to do with this piece of writing? Is it for my blog? A newspaper article? Am I keeping a journal? Students learn to use language differently for whomever will eventually be their reader. Often, we will re-write the same piece of writing for a student's roommate or grandmother so he or she can see how language matters as much as content.

To assess my success in teaching, I rely on a number of factors. Student enthusiasm is an important indicator for me. While I don't feel instructors should tap-dance for students, if a student has a bad attitude about a class or doesn't attend, his or her learning is impacted. If students are excited about their projects and are contributing to class voluntarily, then I know I'm doing something right. If it feels like I'm losing the class, I ask them how we can make what we're doing more useful to them. This is a terrifying process, involving faith in your students as rational, creative adults and the ability to let go of a bit of authority as "expert", but ultimately they are the ones who are important. Finally, I ask myself, is the writing getting better? Theory can only go so far, and it's important that at the end of the day the fancy exercises and readings yield some sort of results. In addition to reflecting on the course, students are asked to reflect on their own growth as writers. Each semester, I require each student to submit a portfolio and reflection paper that assesses his or her understanding of course goals and the level of competency achieved during the semester. Students who can identify their own strengths and weaknesses and who have a strategy for success are usually able to continue learning once they leave the classroom, which is ultimately the goal of any course. I do not expect students to leave my classroom perfect writers, but they must have at least put a foot on the path.

Teaching has been one of the most rewarding things I've done with my life so far. To start with, college students are genuinely fun to be around, especially Loyola students. They are bursting with life and anxious to start making a difference in the world. They show us how we were once, and how we perhaps should be if we weren't so jaded. In addition, when one does the job well, students appreciate it. They ask for letters of recommendation, take another class with you, or take the time to tell you that your class has helped them with another class or another project. That is the most gratifying thing about the whole process: knowing that what you started with a student will continue throughout college, and hopefully throughout their lives. The students also make my own writing better; they challenge me to come up with better ways of teaching, better ways of communicating, and ultimately to be a better person.