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STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

What I dream about today is that we might more often make our classrooms places that connect with the world outside, the here and now; places that show students the power of writing to transform—writing that is not always about later, about jobs and careers, but writing that is about themselves as people, as individuals and as citizens of various communities.

— Lillian Bridwell-Bowles

Many of our students, as they enter the room on the first day of classes, imagine an invisible wall in the doorway. There is the person they are when they walk inside the classroom—the student armed with a textbook, ready to learn the correct way to write—and the person they are in their daily lives, with relationships, jobs, and personal beliefs. Very often, when I ask my students how what they’re writing about connects to their own lives and experiences, they feel uncomfortable with those questions. “Nothing happens in my real life that’s interesting enough to write about,” they say, or, “I’m not an expert on that topic. Why would anybody want to listen to me?” I understand how they feel. I, too, had my own invisible wall as a beginning writer, secretly hoping each time I handed in an assignment that I’d managed, finally, to tick all the unspoken boxes. I thought that the stories, poems, and essays I produced had nothing to do with my life and everything to do with mastering the rules. But learning to write, I’ve discovered, requires a willingness to implicate ourselves as part of the process, to be brave enough to explore through writing what matters to us and to others. I believe, like Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, that learning to write begins with understanding that all writing, whether critical or creative, is “writing that is about [our]selves as people.”

As a teacher, I create classroom spaces where students learn that the writing situations they encounter are not divided between the world of the classroom and “the world outside.” I want my students to understand that, even within the confines of the classroom, the texts they read and write are documents that remain alive, are part of an ongoing dialogue. To help make the links between these spaces more visible for students, I design class discussions and assignments that ask them to identify with the projects of other writers and to notice how authors shape their texts in response to audiences, contexts, and issues that matter to them. By paying close and careful attention to language, and by observing how writers shift strategies and adapt for their individual aims, I encourage my students to begin asking questions about their own choices. I want them to see how even the small moments of texts—bits of dialogue, the precise selection of a quotation, qualities of a particular image—accumulate to create larger effects for the reader. In attending to such dimensions of texts, my students begin to see how the process of revision might help them make connections in writing with the communities and issues that they value. In my classrooms, students form relationships with texts that last far beyond a single assignment, engaging in a recursive process of reflection and revision that unfolds over the course of the entire semester. In this way, the texts my students craft in our writing classes change and take shape in response to their own goals, purposes, and discourse communities.

In order to understand writing as a social activity, it is necessary to give students the opportunity to immerse themselves in real writing communities and make meaningful choices as writers. I find that the stakes of writing choices are clearest for students when they are able to see and participate in their reception. For this reason, I seek out texts that are published in online literary and scholarly journals as part of the reading we do in my classroom. Not only do these texts often speak to issues my students are interested in writing about, but they provide valuable opportunities for response, both in comment sections and forums, and as context for more formal writing projects. Often, after discussing a piece, the online comments of other readers who are outside of our classroom become part of the texture of our discussions, sparking new insights and readings. This illustrates for students the immediacy of potential audiences for their own texts, drafting the material conditions of publication and larger cultural conversations into the fabric of our class.

I know that it is difficult to ask students to make connections between their writing assignments and their own lives. It's easier to follow directions, to look for the correct answer, to keep our writing on the right side of the wall. But I believe it is the work of the writing classroom to ask students to make such connections, to remind them that we do the hard work of writing not just because it matters to who we are as students in the classroom, but also who we are as individuals, who we are in "the world outside."