My Philosophy on the Teaching of Writing Revisited

As someone who is not yet teaching and who is relatively new to the Master of Arts in Teaching program, the readings from this course have been illuminating. My Philosophy Statement, written at the beginning of the semester, illustrates my rather abstract views on the teaching of writing at that time. Throughout the semester, the readings and class discussions have brought to my attention various aspects of writing education that have given me a more complex and well informed concept of what writing education can be and how I would like to approach writing as I begin teaching. Beginning in the second week of classes, the readings on the history of writing education provided useful information on the various trends in the teaching of writing and how these trends have shaped the current state of writing education. In the following weeks, the readings on more specific and current issues — the writing process, genre, grammar, technology, diversity, and assessment — provided a comprehensive view on writing education and helped me further develop my philosophy on the teaching of writing.

My original Philosophy Statement consisted of four main ideas. The first is that writing is a skill that can be learned and mastered with time, patience, and commitment. The second idea is that writing is not merely an academic subject, but an invaluable communication tool that can greatly enrich students’ lives in other academic areas and beyond high school. The third is that writing, as both a skill and a process, can allow students to grow creatively and emotionally. The fourth idea is that a contemporary writing education must acknowledge the relationship between
writing and technology. The readings from this class have confirmed all four of these ideas. In this essay I will look at how these ideas from my Philosophy Statement have been expanded upon and developed through the class readings and how these readings have enhanced and augmented my philosophy on the teaching of writing.

The idea that writing is a skill than can be learned and mastered with time, patience, and commitment is addressed and expanded upon in the readings about writing as a process. Penny Kittle argues for the process approach to the teaching of writing throughout her book *Write Beside Them*. She says, “Instruction has to come during the process of writing, not in polishing the product, or nothing changes” in the way students write (Kittle 8). Donald M. Murray in “Write Before Writing” makes an argument similar to Kittle. He advocates the teaching of unfinished writing so that students can “work with language in action” (Murray 4). While these readings aligned quite well with the beliefs put forth in my Philosophy Statement, I found Marcy M. Taylor’s “Nancie Atwell's ‘In the Middle’ and the Ongoing Transformation of the Writing Workshop” to challenge my beliefs and ultimately alter my philosophy. In the article, Taylor discusses how Atwell’s revised text suggests a different way of viewing the writing workshop. According to Taylor, writing workshops traditionally allowed for little authority or expertise from the teacher conducting the workshop and most of the focus was on the process of writing rather than the product (Taylor 49). In the revised edition, written thirteen years later, Atwell calls for a balance in the way writing teachers approach the workshop so that teachers are seen as “interventionists” (Taylor 48). I found this idea of balance between product and process quite logical: the process of writing is essential if students are to learn how to write. However, after reading Taylor I also saw the value in having students study more traditional finished writing once they better understand the process.
The readings on genre, both expository and narrative, also caused me to reconsider some of my beliefs put forth in my Philosophy Statement. The second main idea in my philosophy was that writing is not merely an academic subject, but an invaluable communication tool that can greatly enrich students’ lives in other academic areas and beyond high school. In Chapter 8, Kittle discusses persuasive writing and how it can be taught as a boring exercise in writing a five-paragraph essay or how it can transcend this formula into a challenging, flexible, and creative lesson in civic involvement (Kittle 132). By showing students that there is a greater purpose to writing than just passing a class, informational or expository writing can present possibilities rather than formulas for student writers. Kittle’s thoughts on the potential of persuasive writing clearly align with those in my Philosophy Statement. However, her writing in Chapter 8 particularly helped concretize for me what some of these lifelong benefits of writing can be and how exactly a writing teacher can help students discover these benefits.

The second genre that was covered, narrative writing, was relevant to the third main idea in my Philosophy Statement, that writing, as both a skill and a process, can allow students to grow creatively and emotionally. Throughout her book, Kittle argues for creative or narrative writing as a way to tap into students’ passions and motivate them to write. Kittle and Murray both emphasize the importance of the creative process as a way to “mine the world for story” (Kittle 25). But Kittle also argues for the inherent benefits of this type of writing, such as allowing students to share pieces of their life with each other. In my Philosophy Statement, I wrote that creative or uninhibited writing is invaluable for high school students as it allows them to share their experiences and viewpoints and shows them that their experiences and viewpoints have validity. After reading Kittle and Murray, I was able to expand my views on the importance
of narrative writing as not only an outlet for students to share their experiences and find their voice but as a way tospark their interest in writing in general.

The last idea addressed in my Philosophy Statement was that a contemporary writing education must acknowledge the relationship between writing and technology. Through the readings on technology and writing education, as well as the additional readings I utilized for my research paper on the same subject, I have become much more aware of the various facets of this topic. Janet Swenson, et al.’s “Beliefs About Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers: Beginning the Conversation” and Robert Rozema’s “The Promise and the Peril: Social networking in the English Language Arts” reflect many of my own beliefs on the use of technology in the writing classroom. Particularly, I agreed with Swenson, et al.’s discussion of the dynamic, interactive and multimodal possibilities of writing via technology and its ability to help students better envision and write for their audience (Swenson, et al. 13 - 14). Additionally, Swenson, et al. and Rozema articulated some of the concerns that I also have with the use of technology in the writing classroom. Swenson, et al. discuss issues of access as they relate to political, economic, and socio-cultural influences (Swenson, et al. 17). Rozema also identifies issues with the use of technology in the classroom, particularly the caution that teachers should take when employing social media for educational purposes. Swenson, et al. and Rozema’s cautious yet open-minded approach to the use of technology in the writing classroom confirmed many of my own beliefs, but also illuminated some new aspects of this topic for me. Once again, the class readings helped concretize the more vague ideas from my Philosophy Statement and provided me with more detailed information that has both refined and added complexity to my philosophy.
In addition to the topics addressed in the class readings that aligned with my Philosophy Statement, there were also topics that were not included in my statement. Grammar was one such topic that I had not given much consideration to. However, the readings on this topic certainly informed my philosophy on the teaching of writing. In Chapter 11 of her book, Kittle explains how she teaches her students that grammar is a tool that can open up possibilities for writing rather than restrict it (Kittle 194). Prior to reading this chapter, grammar instruction had seemed like the driest and least inspiring part of writing education. However, Kittle’s thoughts on helping students understand the function and importance of grammar truly changed my opinion. Similarly, Julie Ann Hagemann’s “Balancing Content and Form in the Writing Workshop” brought to my attention the importance of teaching grammar in context rather than as isolated drills, in a natural way that enhances lessons (Hagemann 74). Additionally, Hagemann acknowledges that Standard English is not always appropriate, yet it is necessary that students be proficient in it (Hagemann 74). This idea was explored in more depth in the diversity reading and has also become a part of my teaching philosophy.

Boyd, et al.’s “Real Teaching for Real Diversity: Preparing English Language Arts Teachers for 21st Century Classrooms” was eye-opening for me and articulates much of what I believe about diversity in the classroom. Boyd, et al. argue that a “hidden curriculum” that enforces standardization in schools also enforces a “culture of power” that promotes economic, social, and political oppression and results in a standardization of students themselves (Boyd, et al. 331, 346). They argue that the English classroom is a crucial battleground where the hidden curriculum can either be upheld or challenged. Boyd, et al.’s call for “socially responsive and responsible teaching” to challenge this hidden curriculum is, to me, both daunting and exciting (Boyd, et al. 338). Creating a classroom culture that embraces and seeks to understand difference
on a meaningful level is undoubtedly difficult, but in light of Boyd, et al.’s words, completely necessary. This reading perhaps most affected my teaching philosophy and has clarified for me how culturally significant English Language Arts education is.

The last topic that the course readings addressed was assessment. Like grammar, assessment initially held little interest for me, but the readings proved to spark my interest and influence my teaching philosophy. Alfie Kohn’s “The Trouble with Rubrics” and Vicki Spandel’s “In Defense of Rubrics” argue against and for the use of rubrics in writing assessment, respectively. While both authors provide compelling arguments, I noted that Kohn and Spandel shared a similar goal: to avoid standardization in writing education. Spandel says, “The real problem with writing assessment lies not within rubrics but with what we value. Ultimately, we do not fail to reward risk taking because a rubric tells us we should. We fail to reward risk taking because we do not value it enough — yet” (Spandel 21). My view on rubrics is undecided, as I’ve yet to use them, but I agree with both Kohn and Spandel that assessment cannot be arbitrary or rigid; it must be flexible and attuned to the needs, abilities and talents of students. This idea of avoiding standardization and focusing on students as individuals has influenced my teaching philosophy on assessment, as well as teaching in general.

Indeed, the topics covered in the course readings tend to overlap and influence each other in my teaching philosophy. The various perspectives offered in these readings have allowed me to question my own assumptions and beliefs about teaching, as well as to confirm many of my ideas included in my initial Philosophy Statement. The concrete examples and advice by authors such as Kittle and Murray have provided my teaching philosophy with much needed substance and fact, and the abstract and theoretical words of authors such as Boyd, et al. have provided my
teaching philosophy with insight and aspiration. With this combination, I feel my teaching philosophy is more substantial, more comprehensive, and more inspired.
Works Cited


