Sample Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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Knowing that all literature is a lie, a lie which opens to a deeper truth, there is no absolute truth in what I teach but, rather, a considered reading; a discovery of pleasure in the new ways of telling, of writing and of reading; a moving in the deep well of words, the spring of phrases, the great interweaving flow of metaphor. This tried each day anew in old ritual is, for me, the joy of teaching.

But this elaboration is the fruit of thirty years perched above a lectern. I certainly could not have thought as fulsomely when I began. I came to teaching with a real love of literature grown of an involvement with the theatre. But I knew that merely performing in the classroom was not teaching so I had to learn my craft from experience and my students.

Involved in a faculty evaluation experiment as a graduate student, I became an early convert to their importance. From the time I began teaching. I used them as a means of assessing both how and what I was doing – to determine how I would alter my practices or what I would do to reshape a course for the following year. I also saw evaluations as a mark of respect for my students – that their opinions were worthy of consideration.

And so through these evaluations my students taught me that teaching involves order, insight and delight in both teacher and learner. The teacher must create an order so that the learner can develop a mastery of the material and not be swamped in it. There is then a need to be flexibly firm: to develop, not impose, a discipline; to recognize differences in students and to work with those differences to cultivate the discipline. The teacher must bring an insight into the work (an insight born of his own reading and intellect) to develop in the student a capacity to analyze that work. The teacher must have a delight in the material so that he can open the students to new ways of writing and inspire in them a respect for it. He must make them delight in what they read and, more, in what they write.

That this is a mutual matter was made clear to me in my first year at Memorial when, teaching Dickens' Great Expectations, I was taught by my students to reverse my critic-framed perception of the endings of the novel. That students could turn over a century-old view was a marvellous revelation that alerted me to the fact that students are original thinkers – and can be encouraged to be so. This is the delight that is teaching: the encounters with insight. This is what the teacher must seek and foster and inspire.

In order to open students to this sense of their own originality and to break down the barriers they may have to literary analysis, I also encourage class discussion. When dealing with a text, I will ask individual students quite simple questions that require only one-word or phrase-long answers. And I will ask a number of students to offer answers to this same question recording all answers on the board. I never comment on the merit of the answer because I want all students to feel comfortable about engaging in discussion with their fellows and know that if such visible distinctions are created between the

capable and the less capable, few will participate. In this way I work my way through a number of aspects of the text and as the responses build on the board it is the students who see themselves – in response to, building upon their fellows' answers – creating their own analysis of the work. The intention is to allow them to shape a confidence in their own analytic ability in a classroom/verbal situation and thus encourage transference of that confidence, to their written work. This approach also means that the students communicate with one another as well as with me, and that there is a relaxed, but ordered atmosphere in the classroom. Being quite open-ended, it leaves me in the position, as master of debates, to switch questions when the range of replies is exhausted, to bring it to a conclusion if that is needed. The discussion has sometimes been so strong that I have left one class (where I had been working on Merchant of Venice) with my long-cherished interpretations shredded by my students to go into another where that second class (partially) restored my faith in my views. This (dis)order woven with a flexible firmness is what so often fires the insight that gives delight.

And so I learned to listen to my students, to learn with them and to learn that there was an extraordinary pleasure for me when they shaped an idea in their own way. Yet one has to accept that this will not always work in the way that one expects. Something like this happened when I was trying to expand their sense of literature with Henry Gass's "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" – at best of times a very difficult story. But the class was one of the sharpest, most vital group of students I have ever taught (I still know most of them by name and it was 25 years ago) and I wanted them to encounter a type of story-telling quite outside their experience – and outside mine as well. So, when I couldn't get the story to work through discussion, I let it take me over and, in a fashion, possessed by the words, raved on for an hour pacing the classroom, alert to their sense of my lunacy. Students will challenge you to do things like that – to try out yourself, to take a chance on ideas, to ride the words into reality, to see that literature is the fire in words and something that has to be experienced in the aural imagination before it is captured by the intellectual.

It is this imaginative and intellectual vitality that my assignments are designed to encourage. I want the students to achieve an originality based on a thorough knowledge of the text rather than a compilation of the critics. With the luxury of comparatively small classes, I can ask for essay-type answers that require discussion of the topic not a definitive answer to it. The essay means I have been able to foster the need for organization in approach to the topic, careful assessment of the sides of an argument and the reaching of a conclusion that is the student's own. This, I preach, is the goal of a university education: the development of the independent mind and critical thinking.

The goal of encouraging their own thinking is reinforced by my other practice: seeing students individually throughout the semester. When I began teaching I told students they would not find grades on their work because I wanted to ensure that they read and understood the comments, and to ensure that they did not slip into either over confidence or despair because of a bald number at the end of their papers. Consequently, they were required to come and see me to get the grade, which meant that it could be discussed and that problems could be addressed. This did not catch all students so that, in the last twenty years, I have taken to seeing each student for three or four ten minute interviews during the semester. Generally appreciated by most students, it has been resisted by a few. It does however allow all to better understand what is required, to express concerns

that they might be shy of mentioning in the classroom and to reduce the distance between the student and this professor (tall, thin, bald, and with an English accent – one student unable to remember my name, described me to a colleague as "sinister”: the kind colleague immediately recognized me).

I teach to extend the intellectual reach of my students and to do that I have to reach them. When both occur: when I reach them and when they reach beyond their expectations, we achieve what the French call complicité. This is that epiphanic moment of accord which is real learning for both those who are called teachers and those who are called students for, at that moment, the boundary between dissolves in the well spring of the idea.