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Believing in One's Approach to Teaching Writing

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An Invitation to Believe

This paper is written for other S/FL writing teachers who, like myself, want to read about more than a newer, more effective pedagogy at a time when the "battle lines" have been clearly drawn. It concerns belief and the need for each of us to enter into a personally fulfilling discourse of thinking that not only engages writing students in life-enhancing and writing-enriching activities, but which also invites us to reflect continually upon what it is we do and why we do it. In so many ways, it is faith in ourselves that I write about. What I'm attempting to address here is the need to develop the same self-esteem in ourselves that the literature invites us to develop in students. In this respect, I write this paper for all writing teachers, regardless of the pedagogical approach you will return to tomorrow.

I begin with Lucy M. Calkins (1994). She makes a profoundly instructive statement at the end of her teacher education text *The Art of Teaching Writing*. What she says is both innocent and controversial at the same time: "We need to be able to teach according to our beliefs," she urges. Calkins in an L1 writing educator whose words have tremendous value and meaning for those of us involved in the teaching of S/FL writing. After all, each of us brings to our work a multiplicity of ideas, values, and perception that shape our involvement with learners. It is our beliefs about such matters that lead us to engage learners in any number of activities, e.g., process writing, and which ultimately emerge in our responding behaviors. What we fundamentally believe about the teaching of S/FL writing is of vital interest to all of us.

The problem is: We don't all necessarily believe the same ideas about writing pedagogy and learning. Moreover, it can frequently be the case that we are expected to teach with someone else's curriculum or course outline, or to adhere to someone else's teaching philosophy, and we find ourselves holding back our beliefs in order to simply obtain and keep a teaching position. From the point of view of learners who generally have to adjust every time they find themselves with a new teacher (not inherently a bad or problematic reality), these may be issues worth addressing in a public format. What *do* S/FL writing teachers believe about pedagogy and learning? Germane to this paper, how

do S/FL writing teachers come to hold the beliefs they have? What do I believe and how did I come to believe it?

While I do not propose that some universally acceptable idea of how to teach S/FL writing suddenly be prescribed for all of us (mostly because I don't think that is possible), I do think it *is* valuable to consider what we believe about our work and, significantly, how we come to whatever beliefs we have. Since our beliefs are influenced by the discourse of others, perhaps by considering what others believe—and how they got there—we may look again at our own ideas and see how they might be informed by the various processes others engage in their thinking and, ultimately, in their writing pedagogies.

Some might say, "Of course, whenever I can, I teach according to my beliefs. That's precisely why I do what I do every day. Thank you very much". Why write about such a seemingly ambiguous and often idiosyncratic issue, then? First of all, simply to believe something and to act upon that belief could result in a writing pedagogy that "sounds right" to a particular teacher, but which could narrowly exclude consideration of what other classroom teachers think or what researchers have found. As someone involved with the teacher education of undergraduate students preparing to S/FL teachers, I often find in introductory level classes that a significant number of these students begin such studies with preconceived ideas about how to proceed pedagogically, largely based upon their own language (and other) learning experiences. It sounds logical, without doubt: I do what/as I've been taught to do.

What I'd like to address in this paper is direct: what I believe about pedagogy in general (which influences the way I teach writing). I'd also like to point out how and where my beliefs have been shaped: from previous teachers, by researchers, through dialogues with colleagues, and by listening to students. One interesting factor in all of this is that these four primary sources are often in conflict with one another, and I am left standing with the need to decide, to choose, to believe something or another that makes a worthwhile difference in my work. Like the students I teach, I must take risks and determine what I actually believe about everything I hear. What do I do when I hear conflicting ideas? Some teachers may prefer to avoid the discomfort of making choices that alienate others and simply do "what's expected". For me, that has never been sufficient. I believe it has been critical for me to think about the pedagogy/learning talk of others, to sort out the input, to reflect on what I am thinking, and to know what I believe. I think this is equally important for others S/FL teachers. All of us can be informed by, first of all, thinking about our believes and, then, by conversing with our colleagues about these issues. The four groups of people who have mostly influenced what I believe are described in each of the next sections.

Listening to "Gurus"

Mark Clarke (1984) has written informatively on the topic of "teaching as I've been taught". In fact, he has made exactly that point, we need to teach as our "gurus" taught us. For him our gurus are those teachers we have personally emulated over time and from whom we think we learned not only content, but pedagogy. For me, that list includes a high school French teacher and a graduate professor of TESL. While many S/FL writing teachers know the public work of the latter person, few, if any, are familiar with the first teacher. Both, in quite different ways, are among those I think of as my teaching gurus. What they taught me about teaching came directly through their own pedagogies.

I often wonder how Phil McGoohan, a religious brother teaching in a Catholic high school in Boston in the late 1960's, could have had such an impact on my professional work today. Much unlike me, he was a strict classroom language teacher (pretty common in a Catholic high school at that time) who arranged 24 students in 5 rows, calling on each of us at random for verbal responses, and assigning an unending variety of grammar drills for homework. He was organized, had a daily plan, and seldom diverged from his prearranged agenda. As I sit here and write this paper, I realize that I do not do any of these.

Yet, somehow, part of what I believe as a teacher derives from my interactions as a student with Phil. Given the directions of S/FL pedagogy research since I've been teaching—and how I have been influenced by it (the topic of the next section of this paper), I must admit that my approach to teaching lies far what what Phil did in my French II class. But something is there: his sincere and personable approach to his teaching, believing in what he was doing, and maintaining a noticeable dedication to what, for him, was obviously a vocation with a true purpose. And he was serious about it all. I know it has been these affective issues that have become an integral part of what I believe about language teaching today. I believe it *is* important to be sincere, approachable, and dedicated. The bottom line for me is that teaching *is* a serious business.

During the 20 years after I successfully passed French II in high-school I attended college, worked at a number of jobs with not-for-profit and governmental agencies, and tried my hand at high school French teaching myself. Eventually I entered an M.A. program in ESL/Bilingual Education Studies at UMASS/Boston, where what I believe about teaching was further shaped by Vivian Zamel whose work in S/FL writing pedagogy has creatively, significantly influenced the direction of teaching writing. By that time (1991), of course, approaches to the teaching of S/FL writing had changed immensely, and it was largely due to the research and publications of Vivian Zamel that many changes had come about. Within the contexts of a few graduate classes I took with her, I found myself

immediately and consistently inspired—to be innovative, to listen to students, to take risks. I still believe these characteristics are important for me as a teacher.

Interestingly, when I think about it, Vivian's classes were not at all like the French II class I experienced in high school. There were no rows of painstakingly placed desks and no teacher who managed her teaching on the basis of detailed notes and plans. Instead, classes were invitations to know myself—as a writer, as a graduate student, as an S/FL teacher. It is clear to me that much of what Vivian did naturally stuck with me and changed my thinking about teaching forever. Beyond the small group work, frequent peer feedback on my writing, the keeping of journals, and so on, were the myriad of personal connections she always made with each of us who were her students. Her energy and sense of professional devotion to what I might call a quality pedagogy left an unquestionable mark on what I now believe about language pedagogy. Her feisty spirit of dialogue engaged me (and others) in a conversation about language education that ran throughout the two-year period of my graduate studies. It has continued to this day as I contemplate my status as a doctoral candidate in second language acquisition at the University of Hawaii.

Believing, as I know Vivian must, that a dynamic personal engagement of language issues with students is at the core of an effective and meaningful pedagogy, I immediately understand where this idea was first fostered in my thinking. As one of my gurus, Vivian unassumingly challenged me to be the very best ESL teacher I could find within myself. I believe I can be innovative listening to students, which involves a great deal of risk-taking. I believe that dynamism in an S/FL writing class can go far in stimulating students to enter the process of writing and to emerge from it with, at least, the beginnings of a writer's identity.

Perhaps that's the point about these two teachers: Although they were engaged in two very different approaches to language teaching, they were not necessarily incompatible. Much more than "what" they did in the classroom, "how" they did it taught me immeasurable lessons about teaching. Their ways of interacting with me as a student have stayed with me and have influenced my decision-making about what I will do on "Monday morning". I know they led me (I'm sure without knowing it) to want to be a teacher with a vision about the linguistic abilities and possibilities of the students I teach. Part of what I believe is that this is even imaginable.

Considering the Work of Researchers

Recently Lad Tobin (1993) wrote a book about the teaching of writing in which he asserts the importance of interpersonal relationships on the writing processes and habits of learners. As I read the text, of course I thought about my two (as well as other) gurus. I began to think about Clarke's (1984) meaning of "guru" more personally, wondering how

relationships which took place in Phil and Vivian's classrooms may have impacted both my writing and my approach to teaching S/FL writing on the college level. In some sense, the issue *is* the nature of these interpersonal relationships that emerged as the key factor which informed my own approach to pedagogy. But I know that what I believe has been shaped by other, less personal relationships as well. For instance, there have been the researchers with whose published work I had had multiple relationships during the time I have been teaching.

Specifically, having nearly completed (as of this writing) two graduate degrees in S/FL teaching, I have considered a seemingly limitless amount of research that has spoken to me from a number of academic disciplines: applied linguistics, linguistics, education, anthropology, etc. One effect of all this has been an approach to pedagogy that is based upon thinking about more technical aspects of classroom teaching (e.g., unconscious acquisition vs. noticing, the effects of small group work, or the possibility of a critical period in S/FL learning) than my gurus made apparent. Of course, I have reflected also on other research that has focused on the nature of literacy, the ways in which S/FL teachers and learners may interact in classroom settings, and how writing teachers respond to student writing. In other words, upon the foundation of enviable role models within my own learning experiences I have also built a solid understanding of how (on the other side of the desk) language learning actually might occur, and how S/FL teachers might invite and facilitate that process. I haven't been operating in a vacuum that suggests that a "good" pedagogy means simply following the more attractive approach of the teaching styles that resonated with me the most. There has had to be a significant academic, research-based reason for what I believe, as well.

An example might serve as a case in point here. When I think about why, in a writing class, I tend not to focus on grammatical issues except within the context of an individual student's writing, I know that it is much more than a matter of realizing that Phil did (focus on grammar) at a time when most language teachers did and Vivian didn't—and that I preferred Vivian's approach. What I believe on this issue has been largely informed by worthwhile S/FL research (e.g., Zamel, 1985: responding to student writing; Auerbach, 1993: how to engage learners in a participatory curriculum; Brown, 1994: communicative teaching as real and authentic; Freeman and Freeman, 1994: whole language for SL Learners; Long and Porter, 1985: small group effectiveness for SL learners; and, Gee, 1991: analyzing the meaning of literacy), which converged with models of teaching I found in both of these outstanding, memorable instructors. There was more to it than finding a guru and following their lead. In this sense, I have experienced a sort of flowing back and forth between effective teachers and reasonable research. I continue to believe that a communicative, whole language approach that invites S/FL students to engage each other in small groups supports students' needs and desire to improve their S/FL fluency.

The Insights of Colleagues

Yet what I believe about language teaching has also been driven by colleagues and the impact of their thinking. For example, for the past 2 years I have been an ESL teacher at the University of Hawaii English Language Institute (ELI), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program for a host of international and immigrant students. The Director of the ELI is Kate Wolfe-Quintero, a holder of three degrees in linguistics who has an uncanny understanding of effective language pedagogy, especially for the teaching of writing. Her collaborative approach to pedagogy, as well as program administration, has served as an indelible reminder of how what I learned from my gurus, and what I also learned from my study, may naturally emerge in a personal and meaningful way through conversation. No one aspect (i.e., gurus, research, colleagues) of this development can be omitted from my thinking as I consider what I will do in a particular writing course or, even, on a specific day. Kate, who undeniably knows both linguistics and effective pedagogy inside and out, consistently teaches me through conversations which, while intellectually stimulating, engage us in a healthy bantering back and forth that, ultimately, leads me to consider what I believe about S/FL pedagogy and why I believe it. Part of what I believe about effective teaching is that conversations with colleagues like Kate are not only helpful, but essential, to my teaching.

Another colleague is Tom Hilgers, the Director of the University of Hawaii Manoa Writing Program (MWP) which directs the university's writing-across-the-curriculum program for all undergraduates. During the Spring semester 1995 Tom asked me to conduct a qualitative needs analysis of bilingual students who were then enrolled in writing-intensive (WI) courses in a variety of academic disciplines. Again, it is the regular conversation with Tom (e.g., comparing his research with native-speaking students to my own with bilingual learners) that has helped me to understand more directly the nature of what I believe about language teaching. For example, based upon extensive conversations with Tom, I know that I believe in the value of "modeling" for academic writing assignments that confronts all WI instructors who teach both native- and non-native speakers of English on the college level. All of this is run through my filter of "guru + research". As with writing, it is a process of coming to know what I think and what I believe. And I believe that it is important to include collegial conversations in my professional life as I think about S/FL pedagogy and learning.

What Students Think

Last of all (but not really), there are also the students I teach. So much of what I believe about teaching has been informed by their input through: classroom conversation, one-to-one conferences, student self-assessments, small group interaction in class, etc. No

matter that I can easily point to gurus, refer to the most up-to-date research, or dialogue with colleagues. What learners have shared with me places all of these other factors in a dynamic and purposeful context. When listening to students, I usually find that that is the context in which these other factors make the most sense—good, bad, or otherwise. I have appreciated the ways in which my interactions with learners have given me contextualized questions to consider. You know, questions like "Al, why are we doing this?" or "Do you really *think,* Al, that teaching me grammar will not improve my English?" Questions with life in them—at least the academic life of the students I teach.

I have been asked questions, for example, which remind me that, even though much of what I believe about teaching has been shaped by the examples of gurus like Phil and Vivian, that other questions are "out there", e.g., How does what I believe about pedagogy and learning impact the academic and personal lives of students I teach? It has never seemed to be the result of my simply imitating what my gurus taught me. Other pertinent questions relate to my reliance upon research finding: Even though researchers like Freeman and Freeman (1992) have suggested the value of teaching S/FL in holistic settings, what do learners think about that? Are the researchers heading in a helpful direction? Again, it has never seemed to me a matter of direct implementation of someone else's research findings within my own classes—but there *is* a connection. And, then, what about my colleagues, like Kate and Tom? Are they always offering ideas and support that 'work" in my own classes? Students easily help me to figure out where I might discover alternative answers to that question. Finally, what about learners themselves? Do they always suggest ideas and offer input to my teaching approach that reinforce or at least offer a balance to what I have found in other sources? Generally, yes, but their input doesn't always address issues which I may have been thinking about in a more studied, academic fashion. Ironically, though, students' input has been the most valuable to me.

What Do I Believe?

To a certain extent, what I believe about S/FL pedagogy is the thread that runs through this paper: effective teaching begins with teachers who think about what they believe and who act upon those beliefs. I suppose that my point about all of this is that I think we, as S/FL teachers should consider what beliefs and values underlie the work that we do each time we face a new class, especially when it seems apparent that so many of us believe so many different ideas about pedagogy and learning. Yet believing in what we do is lacking if we do not also consider where our beliefs come from, with the willingness to shape our thoughts differently if we find that we are operating in a sort of exclusive vacuum. It is significant for me that my ideas have been informed by at least 4 groups of individuals gurus, researchers, colleagues, and students—and I continue to let a pedagogy emerge that is sensible flexible, and meaningful. This is why I agree with Lucy Calkings (1994) when

she emphasizes the significance of teacher's beliefs on pedagogy: We really "need to be able to teach according to our beliefs" (emphasis added). But it is equally critical for me as a teacher to understand where my beliefs come from and to keep myself as informed as possible. An additional point is that it has been important for me to let my input factors "converse" with one another as they converge in my thinking. I am satisfied that I am influenced equally by a number of discourses, none of which I attempt to privilege over the others. When I see that they do not all agree with one another, that is precisely when I sort them out, think about them, and choose to enact a belief that I do find appropriate—but avoid ignoring the input. What I believe depends upon it.

This may appear as a somewhat eclectic way to figure out "what to do on Monday", but I believe it is quite like the way I figure out *any* worthwhile issue in my life—by seeking input through dialogue and thinking, by taking risks through trying out ideas, by striving to maintain a certain flexibility—within the boundaries of my own vision about teaching. There is a direction here, and it happens to be informed by as many viable sources as I can find. And I believe the direction will change and, along the way, be useful to students I teach. Happily, the direction I take will renew my own sense of teaching and invigorate me to continue asking questions, to consistently seek effective responses, and to keep listening to what I hear. Far from being eclectic, what I believe about teaching—and the approaches I hope I will always be willing to take—will emerge from a sense of purpose or mission, a need for helpful, understandable input, and a desire to teach in a way that is not, at its heart, elitist or smug.

What I also believe is that, if more of us who are actively engaged in S/FL teaching or in TESL teacher education are willing to believe something and to consider the sources of our beliefs—to expand them and to engage them openly—what we believe may reliably serve as the basis for how we teach, with the caveat that there will always be additional input (in my case, from gurus, research, colleagues, and students). What we believe will be the result of an intention to be informed by those factors which can best serve our professional needs as well as the learning needs of the students we teach.

For me, this has involved an uncomfortable (at first) process of letting go and *letting* myself be informed. It has meant gathering the wheat and discarding the chaff from more than one field, always asking and listening, thinking and reflecting. In her recent book *The Peaceable Classroom* (1993), Mary Rose O'Reilley writes about how teachers have been conditioned to think of less than all of what is possible. "One of the teacher's hardest jobs," she writes, "is to break conditioning" (O'Reilley, 1993, p. 69). Directly, she was describing for teachers an important task in our work with students in light of their

previous learning experiences. Interestingly, as both a graduate student and a language teacher, I felt her visionary voice speak to me.

I believe her, as I do the other voices I've written about here.

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