**Rachel Howard Teaching Portfolio**

**General Teaching Philosophy**

I balance an awareness of the emotional and imaginative process behind creative writing with the practical study of craft. My goal is to help each writer gain greater freedom in his or her work—because the ideal result of technical mastery is expressive freedom. Technical mastery is gained through the close, careful reading of other writers—and sometimes through simple trial and error, instinct and intuition. I help students find their model writers, and guide them in developing the ability to analyze just how those sentences are doing the seemingly magical things they do.

I believe half the hard work of writing is being fully yourself, and honing your own sense of reality and truth. I encourage my students to develop their own internal awareness of what their writing needs, and to follow that above all. I believe that it is always possible to be both candid and constructive. I believe it is never my job to discourage any writer, or to impose any aesthetic. I have seen that you never know when a writer will suddenly strike something true and beautiful.

I believe that the practice of writing is an unfolding dialogue, and part of my job is to welcome new writers to the conversation. I believe that the writing life is one of the richest lives I can imagine. I tell writers to read voraciously and to experiment fearlessly—because in writing, as in life, there really is nothing to fear.

**The “Craft Annotation”**

My teaching is highly influenced by the approach I experienced through the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. This program requires students to write “annotations”–a special form of critical analysis in which we investigate techniques used by model writers.

**Summary of Teaching Experiences and Courses Taught**

*Ten years as a lecturer of creative writing for Stanford Continuing Studies’ Online Writers Studio. 2009-present.*

* Courses taught: Form and Theory of the Novel, Creative Nonfiction Book, Introduction to Creative Nonfiction, Mastering the Personal Essay, Writing a Book Proposal, Writing About Spirituality.
* Evaluations: For five quarters in a row, earned a perfect “5” in student evaluations. Student evaluations have always ranged between 4.6 and 5.

Sample student comments:“Rachel created a safe space for student writing while still challenging us through honest and constructive criticism. Her approach was supportive and respectful. I not only would take another class from this instructor, but in fact, have already registered for one. I very much appreciate her expertise.”

“Rachel was the best instructor I've had from either UC Berkeley or Stanford. Couldn't ask for better. Competent in the field, well read, super responsive to students, very patient with our difficulties with technology, etc. Best of all, supportive of the students in their writing and in their spiritual quest. Her enjoyment and enthusiasm spilled over, creating a cohesive, supportive class.”

“I feel like I will be pulling from our coursework for years to come. As an instructor, she has a fierce gentleness about her that invites taking risks. I felt her passion for craft and for our work.”

“On every occasion when a response was needed--Rachel demonstrated how to give kind, thoughtful, constructive feedback. I am in awe of her ability to respond in detail to the needs of each student. I appreciate her generosity, not only in giving her time and attention to each of us, but in finding enthusiasm for our words and our quest to write our first novel. I can't imagine anyone doing a better job.”

*Distinguished Visiting Writer at St. Mary’s College of California, MFA Program. Fall 2015.*

* Course taught: Graduate Creative Nonfiction Seminar
* Public craft talk: “Words Creating Space: Strategies for Three-Dimensionality in Prose.” Subsequently published in the AWP Writer’s Chronicle.
* Evaluation: 4.6 with 10 of 13 students responding.

Sample student comments: “She's immensely well-read, talented, and helpful. She helped me a lot, knowing that I was having a hard time adapting myself to the new environment. She also gave us the most constructive in-class exercises which hugely contributed to our extemporaneous writing skills. Overall, she's an excellent professor.”

*Interim Director of Undergraduate Creative Writing, Warren Wilson College. Fall 2012 and Spring 2013.*

* Courses taught: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction, Advanced Creative Nonfiction, College Composition.
* Evaluations: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction: 4.6, with 13 of 15 students responding.

Sample student comments: “Rachel is the best. She’s nice and fair but also pushes us to do our best. With her mastery of craft she guides us young Jedis.”

“Throughout this course I felt my writing really improved. Rachel is awesome. She is intelligent and talented. She respects students and always sparks good discussions.”

* Advanced Creative Nonfiction: 4.6, with 10 of 12 students responding.

Sample student comments: “Rachel is by far one of my favorite professors on campus. She is knowledgeable of the area, kind and considerate to students, and always willing to provide extra time to help the writing process.”

*Joan Beebe Teaching Fellow at Warren Wilson College. Fall 2011 and Spring 2013.*

Courses taught: Introduction to Fiction, Advanced Fiction, Mixed Genre Workshop, College Composition.

*Other teaching experience includes courses in memoir and novel writing at my own community writing school, Yuba Writers’ Workshops, multi-week workshops and one-day seminars at the San Francisco Writers Grotto, and two summers on staff at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers conference.*

**Workshop Philosophy and Method**

My workshop protocol has changed greatly over my past decade of teaching. Initially, I ran workshops in what I think is the standard MFA way, loosely moderating the discussion. I was somewhat influenced by choreographer Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, which instructs respondents to work-in-progress to give only objective statements reflecting their experience of the work, but I couldn’t see putting that fully into practice in writing workshops. And so, I dealt with the garden variety workshop challenges: trying to keep certain students from dominating discussion, refereeing disagreements of opinion, and trying to shape some coherency out of conversations that could ping-pong between one participant noting a story’s strengths, and the next participant countering with an objection. Student evaluations were generally positive, but I felt workshops could be better.

In 2010 I read a craft article by Eileen Pollack, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Theme,” which gradually changed my methods. Whenever possible I have students read this craft article before we begin workshops, but when that’s not an option I quickly explain some basic ideas from it, and that seems to work. (At the Squaw Community of Writers conference, where workshop leaders rotate to a new group of students each day, I’ve even had to sum up the article and instruct the participants on my methods in five minutes flat, yet this has worked.)

This is how I lead workshops:

I ask participants to set aside their preconceived aesthetics or notions of what “good literature” should be, and to concentrate foremost on clearly seeing, and precisely reflecting back to the writer, the work on the page. Next, I ask the writer up for discussion to read a short passage, so that we can all have the voice of the work in our ears.

Then, we start by describing, one at a time, what the piece is “about,” on three levels. First, we reflect back what the work is literally about. Second, we go around the table, one at a time, reflecting back what we perceive as the work’s broad themes. Third, I ask each participant to take a moment and formulate a universal abstract question, short enough to fit on a Post-It Note, that seems to encapsulate the work’s “aboutness.” We share these, one at a time. Often, a notable consensus or lack of consensus will emerge. This is good information for the writer whose work is up for critique. Whether or not the thematic core of the piece seems clear, this kind of close observation and deep thinking on the emerging meaning of the piece naturally reveals where confusions and opportunities for revision lie, and creates good will and receptivity to criticism, because the writer being discussed appreciates the depth of engagement being offered by her fellow writers.

Next, we collectively describe the voice, tone, and point of view of the writing, staying descriptive of these elements rather than judgmental. For the next round of feedback, each workshop member shares thoughts on what is working well within the writing, and pointing to passages that particularly engaged us, precisely describing why those passages did. Finally, we move on to “questions and opportunities” (and suggestions) pointing out where we had confusions about the intention of the work, and places where we felt it could be pushed further towards the work it wants to be. At the end the writer up for discussion has 10 minutes to ask us questions—either clarifications of comments, or concerns about the work we did not address.

Students often find it unusual, at first, to keep the feedback purely descriptive and positive for the first half of the workshop, reserving our questions, confusions, and constructive suggestions for after the initial rounds of describing what the work seems to be about and what is working well. Still, after teaching workshop this way for more than five years, I find that students are consistently grateful for this structure. It helps the workshop members avoid ping-ponging between praise and criticism, ensures everyone at the table has equal say, and identifies the work’s strengths. The confusions and suggestions that would normally come up during a less structured workshop still get aired, but sharing our feedback in this order helps the group avoid interpersonal debates about who has the “right” opinions about the writing.

This past summer at Squaw, the groups I visited said the workshops I led had been their group’s most productive. I can’t take much credit for this as a brilliant teacher, though I do hope I offer a few useful suggestions. I think all the credit lies in the method itself.

**Mentoring**

I currently mentor in both formal and non-formalized ways. I have adapted the low-residency style of mentoring I experienced at Warren Wilson for private students who are either referred to me or want to work one-on-one after a Stanford Continuing Studies class. In this formal mentoring, the student, with my help, generates a Work Plan, deciding on a six-month goal for the work to be written and/or revised, and we brainstorm a reading list to support the kind of work the student wants to do. The student then sends me monthly “packets” of new creative work, craft annotations, and a running letter telling me about the challenges and breakthroughs they’re encountering in their writing. I reply with both line and margin notes, and a long (usually 6-8 single spaced pages) letter, telling them how I see their work developing, how they might take it further, and delving into the kind of moral encouragement developing artists need. These letters are intimate (though professional) and personal. I love this kind of deep mentoring, and students I’ve formally mentored have gone on to Bennington, Warren Wilson, St. Mary’s, California College of Arts, and other MFA programs, as well as published books with reputable publishers.

In non-formal mentoring, I stay in touch with a great many of my past Stanford Continuing Studies, Warren Wilson, and St. Mary’s students, writing recommendations when merited (of course), but also catching up by phone and email, helping them decide which conferences to apply to, or even talking through big life decisions (this job or that job?) to help them structure a sustainable writing life. And of course, sharing reading recommendations, and letting them know we are in this writing life together.

**Reflective Teaching Statement**

Because of my own analytic tendencies and my years studying under semester-long mentors at Warren Wilson, my teaching has been naturally rooted in close reading and personal mentorship. The idea of the “craft annotation”—a special form of critical analysis in which the student investigates techniques used by model writers—has always been at the heart of my teaching, adapted for live group discussion, or modified to different degrees of rigor depending on whether I am teaching undergraduates, adult education students, or MFA students. I think this emphasis on close reading has been one of my strengths. There is nothing I love more than choosing a work of fiction that operates with the potency of poetry—Grace Paley’s “Mother” is my favorite first assignment—and reading it aloud with students, then turning it around in our minds together like a prism, line by line.

When I returned to Warren Wilson for the post-graduate Joan Beebe Teaching Fellowship—which in some ways felt like a medical residency—I learned a lot about how to adapt the “annotation” practice from Undergraduate Program director Catherine Reid, who generously allowed me to study her syllabi and sit in on her classes. Catherine emphasized to me that students need the spaciousness of low-stakes, generative play, which a continual emphasis on technical analysis can inhibit. She also showed me how she would assign students to small live feedback groups for these lower stake assignments, giving them worksheets of very specific feedback questions for preparing their responses to fellow group members. After generating the low-stakes assignment, between classes students would read their small group member’s work, responding via the feedback form. Then, at the next class students would gather into their small groups and take turns sharing their feedback in person, first addressing the prescribed prompts, which could be as simple as “Tell the writer your favorite sentence,” or “Describe for the writer the voice and tone.” Once they worked through those simple feedback prompts, the small group discussion would usually naturally and very supportively flow into less restricted feedback.

At first, I’ll admit, I thought gathering students in small groups during class felt a bit like second grade, and I thought they’d chafe at the pointedness of the prompts. But what I’ve found is that, particularly early on in a class, the small groups help students get to know each other and build camaraderie that then carries over into a full-class, higher stakes workshop. And the pointed feedback prompts come as a relief to students who feel pressured to prove themselves by offering “smart” (often over-reaching) feedback. This result is especially important to me because my teaching goal is usually threefold: First, to make students better readers; Second, to empower them to write more boldly and fearlessly, with an experimental spirit; and Third, to prepare them as productive members of writing communities, because they will need writing community not only within school but far beyond it.

This experience with low-stakes assignments and small groups led me to try a new class rhythm: Alternating “craft annotation” weeks with “generative weeks” for the first half of a course. What I’ve discovered is that by making the first week wholly invested in text analysis, and the second week free of text analysis and given entirely to writing play (often via a very purposely structured writing assignment), students learn to shift between the two modes of mind a writer needs to practice but also to keep separate: the intellectual and the intuitive. In my early adult education classes, students sometimes felt overwhelmed, asked to analyze and then generate all in the same week. But since trying out Catherine’s methods, I’ve received strong feedback on the practice of alternating reading weeks and writing weeks, including five quarters in a row of a top “5” score (meaning every student in a class of 12 rated the class a perfect 5) at Stanford Continuing Studies. In the classes I teach at my own writing school here in Grass Valley, Yuba Writers’ Workshops, every member of the live course I structured this way—six members—signed up again for a second (and then third!) edition of the course, using the same methods with new readings.

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