Teaching Philosophy, RC Hoover, Revised February 20, 2010

Core Values/Principles
- I value learning, and take care to foster and assess it
- When I have done my job to the best of my ability, students learn, and crave to learn more
- "Who are my students?" is a critical question that I answer one student at a time
- My goals for my students are content and culture, skill and sensitivity
- I use a variety of methods and delivery modes
- My methods derive from theory and practice
- I view advising and mentoring students as "the other half" of my job
- Assessment is not a threat; it's an opportunity

"What do I mean by learning?"
Much learning cannot be quantified--learning about friendships or about the subtle differences in scents--and some learning cannot even be expressed but is none the less very real. Yet, in an educational context, when I use the term learning, I mean a specific outward manifestation which suggests a specific inward change. That change can be in knowledge, in skill, in actions, or in attitudes. I value learning, and take care to foster and assess it.

"What are my beliefs, values, and aspirations as a teacher?"
I believe that as humans, we crave to learn; different people, based on their diverse characters, experiences, and cultures crave different topics or different modes of learning, but truly successful teaching happens when the teacher can surface a student's cravings and then nourish those cravings. I believe that my students have the best chance of discovering their own hunger when I do my job well. Doing my job well means that I provide an environment and set of materials and policies which will challenge them but not overwhelm them, that I accurately assess their initial levels of knowledge and skills, and use that assessment to fine-tune the course--meeting their needs and utilizing their strengths. Doing my job well also means that I assess student efforts fairly and promptly, using clear, consistent standards. And, doing my job well means that I can address "special circumstances" in a way students find reasonable and just. Praise from a student, a colleague, or an administrator is nice, but I most value knowing that I have done my job to the best of my ability. When I do, students learn, and crave to learn more.

"Who are my students?"
This is a question I ask myself every day, for every class, for every student. My students have been so diverse that no one answer is sufficient. I discover who my students are, one student at a time, one conversation at a time, one office visit or advising session at a time. When I discover who a student is, what goals/strengths/challenges he or she brings to the educational setting, I can more powerfully mentor/motivate/inspire/educate that student. This is why I schedule sufficient office hours each week that all students who wish to can schedule a time to meet with me in my office. These appointments allow students to ask about assignments or assessments; these appointments also allow me to interact with students as individuals, and this allows me to better understand each student as an individual, and therefore enables me to adjust my teaching technique to the student's level/needs/goals. "Who are my students?" is a critical question that I answer one student at a time.

"What are my goals for my students' knowledge or behavior?"
My goals for my students' knowledge and behavior can be quite simply summarized: I
want them to be able to earn the respect of the professors, employers, and associates that they will encounter later in life. This means that my students not only know how to write a paper, but they know to turn it in on time. It means that my students are not only able to present in class, but that they know how to respectfully listen during others' presentations. It means that my students are able to talk about the differences between Plato and Aristotle, and they understand when to stop talking about it. So, my goals for my students are content and culture, skill and sensitivity.

"What methods do I consider to reach these goals?"

When considering methods for reaching these goals, I consider the context. When the goal is teaching students how to write at the college level, my choice has been to employ a process method (draft, peer review, and revisions based on my feedback) with a sequence of assignments of increasing sophistication. This involves lecture, discussion, small group work, hands on exercises in the classroom, and homework. I evaluate student work using rubrics specifically developed to assess levels of student competence/mastery. My responding to their work swiftly, consistently, clearly helps composition students reach goals for content and skill. When the goal is teaching students about literature, my choice has been to focus on assigned reading and class discussion, supported by essay exams. I have students self-report their RPMQs (how much of the "Reading" did you complete? what is your most significant "Plus" from the reading? what is your most significant "Minus" from the reading? what is your most significant "Question" from the reading?). Self-reporting has worked well, especially when the ensuing discussion probes for details about the reading. Students develop their reading skill and critical thinking skills as well as becoming familiar with the literature. Class discussion and essay exams address course goals concerning content and skill, and allow me to assess students for their proficiency in these areas. I employ other methods, ranging from "peer review" of student papers to policies on graduated penalties for late work. Delivery modes are not quite methods, but do influence choice of method. I have used Interactive Television as a delivery mode, and adjusted methods accordingly. I have used web-support effectively. Although trained to use Blackboard and Angel, I have not yet taught a wholly on-line course, but hope to have the chance to do so.

"What role does theory play in these considerations?"

Methods derive from theory and practice. Theory of personality, of learning styles, of evaluation, of accommodation, of teaching modalities, of best practices of colleagues all provide the foundation for how I prepare for class, how I manage the classroom, how I evaluate my students, how I revise and create curricula, and how I grow as a professional. Practice tells me how well I have utilized theory. I have learned that my own subjective response to "how well things work" is a valid starting place for questioning/refining theory and for adjusting practice. Objective assessment also has played a powerful and useful role in developing my methods. The tools of assessment and the input from colleagues assessing my efforts have both contributed to my methods. Tools of assessment, such as anonymous feedback from students on a particular aspect of a course (I call these "inksheddings" and have a brief story that I tell to students to set the context of the exercise) have helped me refine course pacing, arrangement, and policy, and to detect and mitigate classroom tension. Feedback from peers who assessed my efforts has helped me see the obvious, such as transferring some information from the blackboard to handouts and to electronic form. I have also learned about weaknesses in my own teaching style (occasionally a touch too much sarcasm; inaccurate assumptions about student self-advocacy). My tenure process at WVC was a fine example of this sort of peer assessment. Ongoing peer assessment, giving and receiving, has been one of the strengths of my experience at WVC.

"What are my attitudes toward advising and mentoring students?"

I like it. I view advising and mentoring students as "the other half" of my job. I have my
office door open when I am not in class, and see students several hours a day. Students come by with questions about how to revise a paper or to question a specific grade. I use these discussions both to answer the student's question and to see if more questions surface, which they often do. Students also come by to talk about their interests, their plans, the classes they hope to enroll in next quarter. Mentoring and advising often go together, but for me advising is a specific activity focused on helping the student achieve a specific educational goal, for example, graduate with an AA within two years. To offer sound advice, I must know about programs, offerings, issues in transfer, issues in financial aid, and must know who to contact to get additional information. I like it when students show up for advising with a clear picture of their goals and a list of classes they wish to sign up for; when students do not show up with these things, we work together to clarify the goal, and examine what courses on the current schedule would best help meet these goals. The advising sessions is a success if the student leaves with a clear goal, a clear next step for meeting that goal, and sufficient information to take that next step.

"How are my values reflected in specific course materials, lesson plans, activities, assignments, or assessment instruments?"

Two items of "course materials" exemplify my values: the course syllabus and the weekly agenda. Students consider my course syllabus unusually long and detailed; it contains the course description, and course policies for attendance, grading, special activities, computer use, late assignments (the penalties), late returns of assignments (the extensions), accommodations for disability, and more. This exemplifies my choice to provide the students with as clear a picture as I can of what the course will require. Students report that over the term they came to appreciate the fact that "it was all there" and that I was willing to abide by the syllabus even when it was inconvenient for me. The weekly agenda is derived from the overall course agenda that students receive on the first day; as the name implies, it comes out every week, and it lists course activities and assignments for the current week and the following week. It also lists the agenda for the class session: announcements, attendance, student work handed back, student work handed in, lesson plan for the day, schedule of work due. Because I create this document every week, I can modify the course agenda to meet changing circumstances. Students report that this "weekly agenda" helps them stay more aware of the flow of the course. This also exemplifies my choice to provide the students with a clear picture of what is happening and what will happen next. I value clarity and planning.

Both the syllabus and the weekly agenda require that I plan carefully. This planning starts with the course objectives and works backward toward the initial assessment of incoming students' skills. Course assignments and assessments grow out of my consideration of what it will take to move the student along a reasonable path toward the course goals. My experience has shown me how much I can expect to cover effectively in one class session, and how much reading I can expect students to complete and comprehend for a given session. I create a course agenda based on a series of these episodes, weighing progress toward course goals against depth of presentation, and draw on various techniques until I establish a reasonable series of lesson plans to achieve both progress and depth. Again, I value clarity and planning.

Course activities are sometimes carefully planned, sometimes freeform. When the plan does not work, I go freeform. Activities that I plan include lectures (such as on the grammar of the sentence or on the nature of romantic love as found in literature), class discussions (such as discussion of assigned reading), small group activities (such as peer review or board work revising sentences). With smaller classes, I prefer to have students in a circle or U rather than in rows, because this facilitates discussion.

Assignments are as clear and relevant as I can make them. I want the assignment to move the students toward the course goals. I want students to clearly understand what I am asking them to do and how their work will be evaluated. My "assignment sheets" are one page long; they
identify the task, the method, the due dates, and the criteria for assessment. Assignments might ask a student to compose an essay of six paragraphs employing comparison and contrast to analyze two scholarly articles in terms of specific criteria, or to compose a research paper of eight pages, including a works cited page, and an annotated bibliography, and citing a minimum of sixteen sources using MLA format. Assignments such as the research paper noted above will be supported by previous assignments, such as a brief homework identifying potential topics, another brief homework noting what reference materials in the library will prove useful in researching a given topic, and an assignment of compose a small annotated bibliography. I value moving students along a path toward competence and mastery, so I develop and sequence assignments accordingly.

Assessment tells me how well my assignments achieve their goals, and how to improve those assignments. I assess students' work with rubrics developed to specify what the assignment is intended to accomplish and to identify the level of competence or mastery the student displayed in his or her response to the assignment. I hand out the rubric with the assignment, and discussing the rubric with the students often clarifies their understanding of the assignment. In assessing student work, I am also assessing the assignment and the rubric. Sometimes I discover that the assignment does not move the students toward competence/mastery. Sometimes I discover that the rubric omits a relevant issue or is inadequately articulate about the benchmarks for competence or mastery. Such discoveries inform revision of the materials in question. In addition to assessing students and assignments, I also assess the course, using student feedback (for example, the "inksheddings" noted above), institutional data, and feedback from faculty who expect my students to be able to write; in this way, I can substantiate the degree to which my course is actually meeting the goals established by the institution. I also work with other faculty to assess the programs we are working in, and have been involved in institutional assessment in terms of regional accreditation. I like to know how things are working, really. And I like to discover strengths and weaknesses, to more fully utilize the strengths and to improve in areas of weakness. Assessment is not a threat; it's an opportunity.