**“This I Believe about Teaching/Writing”**

I believe being a pragmatic idealist makes me a better teacher of writing.

On the first day of class each semester, I can’t help but buzz with idealism. I walk into my classroom, put down my bag, and look at the faces of twenty strangers. They’re all bursting with potential; I see in them the possibilities of the writers they may become.

Around week five, the pragmatism takes over. I’ve identified those who have trouble making it to class. I know which ones are pre-med, or on the tennis team by their tired eyes and their requests for extensions. I read rough drafts that are uploaded at 4:30 AM. College is hard, and if I’m not careful, I lose sight of those bright-eyed nervous strangers I met on the first day of class.

I am constantly negotiating my idealism and pragmatism. My idealism peaks at the start of every unit. I write assignments that invite students to inquire into topics they do not understand, speak to specific communities, and investigate something they feel passionate about. My classes spend a lot of time doing invention exercises like freewrites, diagramming, and listing, because I want them to know the topic possibilities are endless. I believe every paper has the potential to be life-changing, though they often are not, hastily written in between biology exams and marching band practice.

Sometimes the papers are life-changing. I remember a first-year student spent a semester researching doctors who are mothers, a project that helped her decide on a major. I remember how an ethnographic interview that a student in my life writing class conducted with a dancer at a local strip club became an unexpected friendship. And I remember a project that showed a computer science major just how much skill is required to create instructions that teach a novice to code. That novice was me, by the way, and after I tested his instructions, he sighed heavily and said, “Well, I guess I better simplify these steps.”

These assignments were successful because of the students’ personal investment. They asked real questions and found real answers. As such, these papers that fuel my idealism are also rooted in pragmatism, the practicality of everyday life. Knowing this, I make the purpose of writing assignments clear. I talk about events happening in our communities. And I remind students that writing in the outside world matters, in both big and small ways.

My assignments are grounded in the reality of my students’ lives. I understand that many first-year students have just moved away from home, so they write collaborative profiles of local haunts to become familiar with their new city and each other. I understand that juniors and seniors are stressed about internships and job applications, so they create resumes and interview professionals who have the jobs they want. I understand my online adult degree-completion students have full-time jobs as managers and parents, so they write essays advocating for change in specific communities of which they are part.

At the end of each unit, my hope is not that the pile of graded essays is full of writing that is life-changing, but rather that students have learned that they can become agents of change through their writing. I want them to learn to balance their own idealism and pragmatism in their writing, hoping for a better world but also realizing what it would take to make that world and how to begin working in that direction.

Balancing idealism and pragmatism doesn’t only apply to how I view my students. It also applies to how I view myself as their teacher. I constantly work to balance my desire between wanting to be that unforgettable and life-changing teacher, and realizing that some of them won’t even remember my name in a few months. No matter how I try, not every student will care; not every student will go from stilted sentences to lyrical prose. But I must celebrate the small victories, the lights that pop on, the thresholds that we cross together. For some, the class will only be a line on their transcript. Others will remember being challenged and respected. And for me, I’ll continue adjusting and readjusting my expectations and hopes for each new batch of strangers every August and January, for constantly seeking equilibrium between idealism and pragmatism helps me to both view students for who they are and also imagine what they are capable of, who they could become.