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Personal Statement

What gets me up in the morning is a combination of passion and precision. I am quite sure the source of these driving forces comes from my ten years of teaching junior high school where students were malleable, capable, and daily unpredictable. As a neophyte teacher, I quickly learned how to “seduce” students into learning; in return, students discovered that learning could be fun. From my graduate study and dissertation on neurological conditions that foster insight, I verified my pedagogical instincts. Now almost thirty years later, three principles continue to guide my interaction with college students: engagement with a problem, playfulness, and investment of time.

Someone visiting my classroom might label me an environmentalist—arranging the physical space as well as creating a safe haven for making connections and taking risks. My *passion* wants students to immerse themselves in the subject matter, not because the subject matter itself is sacred, but because reflective learning is. Students learn best when they are invited to engage in problem-solving, when they experience new knowledge inductively, when they have the freedom to play with ideas, speculate, confer, modify, amend, question, and reconfigure initial thought. My *precision* wants students to spend time in critical thinking and deep reflection not only about the course material, but also about the process of knowing, and their own style of learning. Class periods are generally balanced with time for grappling with open-ended questions--individually and collaboratively--some mini-teaching from me or a prepared group of students, and opportunity for reinforcing skills and refining insight. This recursive movement between passion and precision, exuberant creativity and reflective metacognition, helps students claim their identity. Furthermore, I want them to explore the ramifications of their conclusions and decisions, their impact on the larger human and non-human community. My goal is to ignite energy around the process of learning and help students surprise themselves into new ways of knowing and belonging. I believe Donald Murray and Bernard Lonergan, who have demonstrated surprise begets surprise, insight begets insight.

As a literature teacher, this means inviting students to allow their own experience to collide with a text in order to construct meaning, and then to test out that meaning within the larger reality we share. As a writing teacher, this means creating assignments that require students to identify and analyze their Purpose, Audience, Subject Matter, and Self (P-A-S-S), give and listen to peer comments, and receive appropriate coaching from me. Through the invitation to re-envision writing, students hone their thinking and writing prowess until—if I have used my conferencing skills well—they are satisfied with the final results.

In classes that demand mastery of theory, concepts, and data, I encourage students to find a study-buddy. Even then mastery of certain skills or concepts that are prerequisites for professional success can come any time during the semester, not

necessarily by the mid-term examination. Consequently, I offer students the opportunity for make-up exams and conference time during which they explain to me why they made mistakes, what they now know, and what is still confusing. My penchant for offering study guides and my famous “Fixin’ to Face the Final” handout encourages students to engage in synthetic thinking about the course, luring them, I believe, to higher levels of engagement.

While professors do not often see the fruit of their teaching, my years of working with English Education students have provided ample opportunity to witness growth and blossoming in pre-service teachers and meet them years later at professional meetings. I am pleased every time I meet a successful teacher who remembers my class in grammar and composition theory or the methods class as the toughest course s/he ever took, yet the most valuable. I am pleased because I believe that students in my classes learn more than course material. They learn various ways to break open a text; they learn rhetorical strategies to enable success in multiple writing situations; and they see pedagogical theory and praxis modeled in ways they can use in their classrooms. Perhaps most important, they catch on to the Promethean task before them: bringing fire to the next generation of learners.