

Gary Hawkins

Teaching Statement

I teach as I write: coaxing solitary ideas into rough dialogue with the world. This means I'm inevitably moving myself and my students between two reciprocal energies. I work to cultivate possibilities (demonstrating how to mine texts for the ideas they hold as well as the structures they model; helping to unearth begged questions; leading a survey of the landscape of the writer's choices); and alternately I work to attain a true direction (claiming an idea or following a structure; pursuing answers; choosing).

It used to be that this tandem work would require a prerequisite stage where I'd need to combat the inertia of compliance (and silence) to just get students talking. Lately, met by the greater loquaciousness of students at Warren Wilson College, I can place more and more effort on the first mode, cultivating those possibilities with spiraling questions, nurturing the back and forth of unruly democracy, the half-baked thought going toe-to-toe with the carefully considered proposal.

Still, I fear that too often our "discussion" is more an awkward Socratic born of my enthusiasm and their residual and engrained desire to please the teacher. To offset this, I try hard to broker rewards for tentative or reaching contributions as much as for brilliant insights. Further, it is possible that this uneasy classroom dynamic reveals who I really am: an uncertain democrat. While all ideas and modes may deserve equal opportunity under the law of the workshop, in the province of my classroom some choices, once fully formed, will be revealed to be superior. So, creating the criteria for this judgment becomes one of the central purposes of every course. If we begin in an expertise that I initially hold, then I will systematically draw forth know-how from students so that they can guide themselves. I'll call on individuals to lead the class or arrange distributed groups to tackle parts of a larger problem, always expecting that they will not only draw on the rhetorical structures they are discovering but also suggest something of their own, a new configuration of evidence, say, or a slight shift in the facet of an image.

None of this will work if students think that any one contribution (be it speaking in class or writing the draft of an essay or revising a poem) will be the sole basis by which they are judged. Already, too many undergraduates initially equate *writing* with *expression*, and then it is themselves they see on display in any object they produce. Rather, my interest is to help them see their how their drafts track the evolution of their choices as they attempt toward a more and more superior art. This often means drawing process—especially the earliest and roughest portions—into the classroom where we can all draft from a common starting point and then, with practice, get used to laying bare even our most unstable first attempts at lines—and then over time follow their changing arcs. In this, all writing aspires to poetry, the unattainable art.

Throughout, I have to remember that the work of writing—of learning—is no sure, upward trajectory. For all its leaps of transformed understanding (the moments of epiphany we often take as metonymy for *learning*), the daily work of learning usually staggers and often unfolds quite slowly. Even knowing this, a class that cultivates the mess and chaos of a catholic process also needs sufficient frameworks to allow the students to thread an evolutionary through-line. I create these best by devoting considerable attention to the structures of the language. My classes are filled with uses and methods, with forms, with tropes, with both *yes/but* and *yes/and* as ways to pivot from affirmation to critique. Each of these structures I offer not merely as practical options but as tactics employed to both discover and lay forth *what you have to say*.

Because for a student as for every writer, your agility with choices is your best measurement. You prepare; you do the work; afterwards, you step back and reassess; you plan how differently you'll do it next. So in teaching, every single class is practice to make the next one my best.