Teaching Statement

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. – Paulo Freire

Over the years, I've invoked many ideas to describe my teaching. I've written about the benefits of asking students to do public writing for authentic audiences. I've asked the field of Rhetoric and Composition to consider how engaging students in public writing communities can inform their understanding of writing knowledge and practices and provide opportunities for cultural intervention. I've attempted to theorize a notion of public pedagogy that interacts with one or more extra-academic publics for the purpose of civic engagement and cultural participation. Through and because of these activities, I've come to understand traditional school genres as arhetorical and often unhelpful. In turn, this understanding has also lead me to begin working to build and share pedagogies that allow students the chance to effect social change in the world, to gain authority in their writing, and to gain conceptual knowledge about writing and digital media production through an enacted and richly rhetorical process engaging material realities and rhetorical discourses: what I call a writing praxis.

I feel confident that my teaching has already allowed me to do these things. But it is my more recent understanding of the notion of praxis that has allowed me to name them, and to see how these goals can be accomplished through an active and enacted pedagogy in which students, together with their teacher, work towards authentic writing and learning. I invoke praxis in the tradition of Paulo Freire and Hannah Arendt, to indicate a socially meaningful and rhetorically conscious method of active response to and within actual social cultures, one that bases such action on careful reflection of the ways writing mediates social realities and hierarchies. Praxis is the understanding and enacted practice of writing to effect social action, to establish relationships, to construct our selves and others in the world. It is what makes us human, in the words of Freire, and what makes us capable of making responsible, critical and reflective meaning in our daily lives.

Praxis takes shape in my classroom in multiple ways. My goal is to make critical learning and thinking come alive through creative, innovative, and consequential assignment projects. In my course design, *Women Writing in Digital Spaces*, for example, I ask my students to address Wikipedia's gender gap, its lack of representation of subjects dealing with women, gender, and women's issues caused by its homogenous and heavily male editor-base. Students are able to effect social change in this type of project by creating and editing articles that extend coverage and representation of women's studies and LGBTQ topics in Wikipedia. But they also learn valuable critical thinking and writing skills. As de facto global reference source in this post-Britannica moment, Wikipedia is often seen (especially by students) as a neutral compendium of information. When they begin to consider how imbalances in the editor demographic (in terms of gender, yes, but also in terms of race, class, and nationality) influence content, they can also begin to realize how important it is to consider Wikipedia from a critical stance that questions its print-centric, rationalist epistemology.

Allowing students to accomplish writing and digital media production that effects social change also provides them opportunities to assume authority. My experience as a teacher has enabled me to realize the value and means of authorizing writers. To gain authority, students need to come to an

understanding of both discourse and reality as deeply rhetorical and constructivist, and of writing as the tool with which they can participate in the rhetorical situation. To prepare them to use writing confidently, I also teach students to use technologies to help them accomplish their goals. In my course design, *Writing, Reading, and Rhetoric in the Professions,* for instance, I ask students to create a digital portfolio to house their résumé and other work and to serve as a professional presence on the web. Students build these portfolios as a culmination of all the work they do in the course, and by learning and practicing to use an open-source web authoring program, gain the skills and knowledge necessary for digital publishing. They write their professional selves into existence and, in the process, begin to envision who those selves are and how they are qualified within a particular field or discipline.

A writing praxis enables the creation of ourselves, and it enables our abilities to make meaningful impacts on the world around us through and with all forms of writing. But praxis also enables learning at the most fundamental level. If we want students to achieve conceptual writing knowledge, we must enact that knowledge through the provision of highly contextual and interactive writing tasks. If students are to come to an understanding of genre and rhetoric, for instance, we must allow them to see how those operatives function within a specific writing situation. It is this necessity that leads me to engage students in texts and situations in which they have experience and access, and which show and enact specific writing processes through their own constant and contemporary circulation.

Digital genres such as visual memes, videogames, and social media provide these types of opportunities strictly because they are so readily active, enacted, and available to students. These are the genres that a large majority of students are already involved in. Bringing them into the classroom isn't just a means of capturing our students' attention with a flashy lesson plan; it represents a conscious decision to consider the genres that are meaningful to students and that play a significant role in public culture. In my course design *Digital Rhetorics and Literacies,* for instance, I teach an assignment in which students analyze the construction of race and ethnicity in a multiplayer videogame, *World of Warcraft.* Examining this videogame as a text does more than engage students in a familiar genre; it also opens them up to new understandings of how racial essentialisms are mediated through visual, textual, and social gestures within a multimodal game environment.

Because my students are working towards meaningful action through critical writing and thinking, I see myself in the classroom as a mentor and collaborator. I'm committed to working *with* students to help them reach these specific goals: to help them see their own capability to effect social change, build authority as writers, and gain conceptual knowledge about writing across old and new media platforms. My classroom practices also reflect this. I encourage open discussion and collaboration. I work to decenter my own authority in order to allow space for students to find their own. I meet students where they are in their writing skills in order to help them get to the next level. I encourage extended processes for major assignments and ask students to work toward larger assignments with informal writing tasks and participation. More than anything, I attempt to make my classroom a place where writing works to engage the world, where it accomplishes some social action, and where—through such engagement— my students themselves become critical, capable beings who understand writing and know how to use it in their everyday lives.