WHEN TEACHING IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR

The mission statement at Lafayette College, the small, private college where I work, claims teaching as a priority: “Effective and challenging teaching,” it explains, “is the first priority of the faculty both in the classroom and in a variety of independent and collaborative learning experiences” (“Profile”). And, indeed, I have been struck repeatedly by the degree to which faculty here are invested in their teaching. But as a beginning assistant professor, I have been equally struck by a marked reluctance on the part of some colleagues to talk about the intellectual work of teaching, to see teaching and learning, as Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue have proposed, “as historicized and theorized intellectual practices” (83). As I have become acclimated to the culture of teaching here, I have come to understand this “reluctance” as the result of how, despite the college’s public commitment to undergraduate education, teaching remains largely a private activity. Of course the situation I describe here is not unusual. The status of teaching as intellectual work has always been contested in the academy. But contradictory attitudes toward teaching are, I think, more visible—maybe even more pressing—at a small college whose mission is defined by its commitment to undergraduate education.

In the following discussion, I describe my experience teaching writing and literature and administering the college writing program at Lafayette. Though I want to resist making claims about the culture of teaching and learning at all small colleges, I suspect that readers who teach at other small schools will recognize similarities to situations encountered at their own institutions. Looking at my “private” experience in the classroom and at my “public” experience as a WPA, I will consider some reasons why, even at a teaching-oriented college, what happens in the classroom between a teacher and her students has, at best, limited public visibility. In my conclusion, I will suggest how, in spite of such limitations, a teaching-oriented college potentially serves as an ideal place for challenging assumptions about teaching as a “private” affair.
I.

When I started writing this essay, I kept thinking of the scene in the film *Dead Poets Society* where the unconventional teacher John Keating instructs his students to rip the editor’s introduction out of their poetry anthologies. Students stare at him in disbelief. “We’re not laying pipe,” he tells them, “we’re talking about poetry.” One by one, students begin to tear from their books the pages in question. Ironically, in this celebration of “freedom” from rules, of individualism over theory, students blindly follow Keating’s instructions. The irony here is perhaps unintentional. The film, that is, portrays Keating as heroic. But then one student carries things too far and, in the ultimate act of rebellion against authority, commits suicide to free himself from his overbearing parents. This act threatens to expose Keating’s philosophy as yet another set of rules, no less ideologically driven than any other.  

In fact, the film’s ambiguity on the issue speaks precisely to the power that these images of teaching—and learning—hold in our culture. This scene dramatizes many of the assumptions that, beginning at the turn of the 20th century, have served to de-professionalize teaching by making it the product of intuition and inspiration, and no one has been more frequently associated with this image of the “natural born” teacher than the English teacher. Keating’s rejection of the traditional teaching methods espoused by his colleagues makes him a dynamic teacher, a revolutionary much like the Romantic poets he teaches. Like the Romantic stereotype of the great author, Keating, a great teacher, is similarly original, spontaneous, and inspired. As the historical work of scholars like Gerald Graff and Michael Warner and, more recently, Mariolina Salvatori has shown, this image of the teacher has its origins in turn-of-the-century debates about language and learning in the context of which English as a discipline began to emerge. Graff and Warner document the “generalist/specialist wars” between those who favored the study of literature for the purposes of appreciation and those who advocated more “scientific”—i.e., philological—approaches. And Salvatori shows how those debates about the study of literature should be understood in the context of the larger debate over pedagogy, itself, as art or science. By the early 20th century, according to Salvatori, the teaching of literature came to be characterized as either “a teacher’s mechanical application (hence, for some, ‘pedantic’ and ‘pedestrian’ . . .) of someone else’s theories” or as “the automatic, or the natural extension of a teacher’s knowledge of ‘subject matter’” (60). In their focus on the teacher, Salvatori notes, both constructions “obfuscate the role of the learner” and both “ultimately dismiss pedagogy, the first by rendering it intellectually uninteresting, the second, intellectually unnecessary” (60).

Studying this history has been important to my own transition to small college culture because it gives me a context for understanding why, at an in-
stitution defined by its commitment to undergraduate education, scholarship in teaching and learning is considered neither especially interesting nor necessary. As is the case at many small, private, liberal arts colleges, what we do have is a strong commitment to “student-centered” learning, individualized attention, and close student-faculty relationships. These are, in one sense, ideal teaching conditions; indeed, they are what attract faculty and students to a place like Lafayette. In my experience, though, these ideals also contribute to a notion of the teacher as independent agent, and of education-as-tutorial, as a kind of private transaction between teacher and students (especially between a gifted teacher and a gifted student) that undermines a particular benefit of working at a teaching college like ours—namely the possibility for collaborative work among faculty. I don’t mean team-teaching, necessarily, although that is one possibility; rather, I mean developing a common language and an ongoing, intellectual conversation about the main thing we have in common: several times a week we get up in front of a class and teach.

The problem of teaching as a private affair has been the focus of considerable work in the scholarship of teaching and learning. In his 1990 Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate, Ernest Boyer explains that “professors, to be fully effective, cannot work continuously in isolation” and identifies the scholarship of teaching as an ideal venue for cross-disciplinary conversation: “a campuswide, collaborative effort around teaching would be mutually enriching” (80). Following Boyer, much work has been done on the role and value of teaching portfolios for making teaching visible. (See, for example, Lyons; Murray; Minter and Goodburn; Seldin.) As much of this work demonstrates, teaching portfolios provide important opportunities not only for documenting, but also reflecting on one’s teaching. Sarah Robbins, for example, has discussed her use of “ethnographic principles and practices to gather data” for her portfolio (27). And Ruth Mirtz observes that teaching statements and portfolios are “chance[s] to synthesize theory and practice, to highlight successes, to argue for specific methods, and to educate the many audiences who will read [them]” (43). But as much of this scholarship also demonstrates, the use of teaching portfolios can be risky business, depending on whose interests are served. For example, as Julie Robinson, Lisa Cahill, and Rochelle Rodrigo Blanchard explain:

Teaching portfolios can function as documents that make teaching identities visible (for example, through teaching philosophies and letters of recommendation) and show evidence of teaching performances (for example, through lessons plans, assignments, and activities) to different audiences who have a variety of motives for reading the portfolios depending on their degree of power and influence. But by
representing teaching identities and performances through portfolio documents, they become accessible and assessable. (15)

And as Carrie Shively Leverenz explains, the ethical issues raised apply not just to teachers preparing portfolios, but also to those responsible for reading them:

many teachers worry about how to construct representations of their teaching that show themselves in their best light while also identifying areas for improvement. Similarly, many WPAs worry about how to respond to those representations both critically and supportively. Also challenging for the WPA is deciding how to use knowledge made in this interaction to create a writing program that is coherent and yet allows for and encourages difference. (111)

The difficulties of representing teaching described here are, arguably, difficulties that arise not only with portfolios, but whenever teaching becomes a public affair. As an assistant professor required to have my teaching observed twice a year and prepare an annual self-evaluation, I am well aware of these dilemmas. My graduate training taught me to see difficulty and struggle in my teaching as opportunities for learning, as places where the most interesting questions might be engaged. That kind of reflection was encouraged and valued—even for purposes of evaluation and promotion. I thus learned to think about my teaching as an ongoing process. In my current job, however, things are different. In Scholarship Reconsidered, Boyer notes that the privileging of research over teaching in the academy often means that “good teaching is assumed, not rewarded” (32). At Lafayette, as I imagine is the case at other small colleges that stake their reputations on the teaching effectiveness of their faculty, good teaching often is rewarded. But because good teaching is also assumed (it is something we all just do), it is not understood as a topic worthy of scholarly inquiry. It took me a while to understand that, however interesting my struggles and difficulties might be to me (i.e., privately), the (public) story I was supposed to tell about my teaching was about how I succeeded in overcoming those difficulties. This pressure has likewise intruded on my work as a WPA. My primary administrative responsibility is helping colleagues teach with writing in their courses, but because the culture of teaching here encourages success stories, substantive talk about teaching can be difficult.

II.

In writing about the privatization of teaching and its impact on my transition to small college teaching, I do not want to be understood as making “public” a process that occurred in “private.” Some of the things I write about
here, I have also written about in “public” documents such as annual reviews (read by my Department Head, the Provost, and eventually the tenure committee). And nearly everything discussed here I have already said in “public”—in informal conversations with colleagues, in faculty development workshops, and at professional conferences. My aim, then, in examining how I revised my teaching practice is not to reinscribe the private/public distinction, but rather to trouble it. What are the implications of imagining the classroom as a private space? “‘Private’ for whom?” we might ask. In fact, the classroom is an inherently “public” space where identities, arguments, and ideas alike are negotiated, contested, exposed. To imagine a “private” classroom is, in some sense, to privilege the teacher’s view. I doubt that my students seated in a circle, discussing one another’s writing or talking through what challenges them about a given reading assignment, consider themselves to be in a “private” space. Granted, my classroom is not representative. But even in a classroom where the teacher lectures, there are students present—listening, taking notes, and perhaps raising questions. Why, then, imagine teaching as something we do in “private”?

In fact, as a graduate student, I had learned to do just the opposite. My graduate training at the University of Pittsburgh taught me to see my classroom as a kind of public text—available for interpretation, reflection, revision. I learned to think of my role in terms of facilitating learning, as creating opportunities for students to take responsibility for what and how they learn. These elements defined the model of teaching I carried with me to Lafayette, and I imagined myself well suited to the culture of teaching at a small college. But, in fact, my biggest challenge as a teacher has been reconciling that model with the college’s “public” representation of teaching. Both models emphasize student-centered classrooms, but in very different ways. Lafayette’s 11-1 student-faculty ratio (not unreasonably) raises expectations about individual attention and close student-faculty relationships. Accordingly, our web site regularly features images of teachers and students engrossed in some academic activity—pouring over books, staring intently at test tubes, etc. Less often does it feature images of students working with other students. Education is represented—at least in our public documents—as a private transaction between teacher and students. These images, which reflect assumptions about schooling and learning in our culture at large, inevitably work to shape local classroom dynamics on the Lafayette campus and, as I soon discovered, worked against the kind of collaborative atmosphere that I had learned in graduate school to create.

That my Lafayette students were reluctant to take seriously their own writing as a vehicle for learning was not initially surprising. The relatively low status of student writing in the academy encourages students to see their writing as perfunctory and insignificant. What was new for me was the fact
that most of my students thought of themselves as “good” students whose hard
work and perseverance had earned them a place at a selective private college.
Their confidence not only made them reluctant to learn from one another, but
they were also reluctant to abandon formulas and strategies that earned them
A’s in high school. Although Lafayette students struggle with many of the same
reading and writing issues as my former Pitt students, they are, by comparison,
less willing to experiment with their writing. Instead they are more likely to
conclude that an assignment “doesn’t relate” to their experience—which usually
means that an assignment has challenged what they thought they knew about
skillful reading and writing.

Student resistance is not, of course, a bad thing: as a teacher, part of
my job is to challenge students’ assumptions. Any student who has worked
to master the kinds of reading and writing practices traditionally rewarded in
elementary and high school is understandably reluctant to question those prac-
tices. I realize that the kinds of traditionally “successful” students I’m describ-
ing are not necessarily typical of all small schools, or even small as opposed to
big schools. But at Lafayette, as I suspect is the case at other small, selective
schools, there is a greater proportion of these students in a given class. Thus,
their assumptions about reading and writing tend to be the dominant ones. And
I find myself working harder than before to get a class, as a group, to consider
how they know what they know about reading and writing.

I’ll explain one kind of change I’ve made to adapt to this challenge by
looking briefly at two versions of my syllabus for English 110, the composition
course Lafayette students are required to take in their second or third semester.
The first version, from my first semester at Lafayette, introduces the work of
the course in this way:

College Writing (English 110) is a course about reading as well as
writing. Over the course of the term, you will be asked to use your
writing to respond to and actively engage with the assigned readings.
Indeed, this course takes as a working argument the idea that writ-
ing—particularly the kind of writing required of you in college—is
a means not simply of repeating the content or “main idea” of what
you read (although that is something you need to be able to do), but
even more fundamentally a means of working on and thinking through
your understanding of a written text. (1)

In this version of the syllabus, I characterize the course, as I used to for my Pitt
students, largely as one that prepares students to do college-level reading and
writing. However, by the time Lafayette students take English 110, they have
already been doing “college-level reading and writing” for some time. At the
very least, they have had a writing-intensive first-year seminar and most likely
other courses in which their grasp of the material was evaluated on the basis of their writing. This was something I knew about the Lafayette curriculum when I started, but I didn’t understand the significance of this circumstance for my students until I got to know them better. My remark was originally intended as a way to initiate a conversation about how college-level reading and writing are different from what students may have learned up to that point. Though this is as true for Lafayette students as it was for Pitt students, the idea of a preparatory course, I discovered, conflicted with their perceptions of themselves as readers and writers.

I came to this realization when I read my students’ course evaluations. In spite of my efforts, few students had found the course “relevant.” I found this response puzzling—in part because the course evaluation form doesn’t specify relevant to what, so I had no context for interpreting students’ responses. But it was also confusing because every assignment in the course had asked students to apply what they read to some aspect of their experiences as students—i.e., at the least, students should have seen some relevance to their own lives. Looking back now, though, I think my students’ evaluations demonstrated that I didn’t know enough either about their senses of themselves as readers and writers or their expectations for the course as a whole. From my perspective at the time, it seemed that students were learning, that their writing was changing in productive and interesting ways. The problem was that they couldn’t see it. When I teach the course now, I make more time—in class discussions as well as in assignments—for students to talk about such things, and particularly for them to talk about how they’re revising their habits and assumptions. The revised version of my syllabus reflects this shift in focus:

Welcome to College Writing. As Sophomores, you have been doing college-level writing for a year now, so this course will not start over from scratch. Rather, the course is designed to build on the reading and writing skills you’ve already acquired by helping you think about them in more complex ways. Like your FYS, English 110 considers writing as an intellectual act and a recursive process (a process with complex, recurring subprocesses—e.g. drafting, revising, editing, etc.) This course shows you how writing can work as a tool for developing thought, rather than turn, by default, into something you produce for a grade or under the pressure of a deadline. (1)

In its revised form, the syllabus introduces the course by calling attention to what students bring to the class in the first place. I do not mean to suggest that I have abandoned altogether the aims outlined in the early version. Rather, I have tried to frame them differently to show students that what the course really does is to make them better readers of their own writing. My students
do not, that is, need to learn writing skills, so much as they need to understand what makes their writing skillful and especially how to adapt the skills they’ve learned in the face of different disciplinary requirements.

In helping students revise the ways they think about reading and writing—students who consider themselves capable writers—I likewise have had to revise the way I think about my teaching. In the process, I have had to re-articulate for both myself and for students what I think the work of a student-centered classroom really involves. I have come to see how my students’ expectations about the kind of personalized attention advertised in the college brochure—part of the college’s “public” representation of learning—sometimes interfere with the collaborative work that happens in the writing classroom. I was bothered, for example, by some students’ comments that they preferred individual conferences with me to class discussions. But, as I discovered, participating in a discussion—especially a discussion about student writing—is new for many of my students. Again—this was true for many Pitt students: rarely were classes there small enough even to have discussions. But at a small college like Lafayette, most imagine small, discussion-based classes along the lines of the ones in the glossy brochures where students sit outside (another throwback to romantic stereotypes of learning) listening in rapt attention to their professor. (One student actually wrote on a course evaluation that I should hold class outside more often.) Moreover, here students know that if they do not “get” something by the end of class (or if they have to miss a class), they are likely to find me in my office later to explain it. And I usually do. Around here, students depend on—and most appreciate—this kind of attention from professors. But such attention on a regular basis can also discourage students from listening to and learning from each other in class and can, consequently, work against what I am trying to show them about reading and writing as a “public”—i.e., social and socializing—practice.

III.

[T]eaching writing is always collaborative. There are few teaching methods that can really be said to belong to any person . . . one of the most satisfying parts of teaching writing is in the ways we all help one another out.

Connors and Glenn,
The New St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing

My students’ assumptions about the purpose and value of their writing reflect the ways in which they have been invited by us—their teachers—to imagine themselves as writers in the academy. This is something I understood when I came to Lafayette, but over the course of my time here, I have also had occasion
to think more deeply about it, largely as a result of my WPA work. That work, more than anything else, has made me aware of problems in the profession arising from assumptions about the privatization of teaching. At the same time that I was “privately” negotiating for myself the ins and outs of teaching writing at a small college, I also had to function as a kind of public spokesperson for our writing program—working with colleagues teaching writing-intensive courses or interested in revising their approach to teaching with writing, speaking authoritatively about a program I was still learning about. But in an environment where a teacher’s classroom is considered to be “private” space, WPA work, by definition, is easily perceived as a violation of the private/public boundary. Again, this perception is all the more surprising here at Lafayette where the core requirements include five writing courses. As a body, the faculty publicly acknowledges the importance of writing in the curriculum. But when it comes to thinking about the use of writing as a tool for learning, we tend to assume that it is the responsibility of the individual professor.

One of the first administrative jobs I had at Lafayette was to help the Director of the Writing Program with a series of workshops on teaching with writing, attended by faculty in arts and sciences who are teaching our writing-intensive first-year seminars. In my role as administrator, I was supposed to be advising colleagues about using writing as a tool for learning in their classes. We would talk about things like designing good assignments and responding to and evaluating student writing. But as a new faculty person myself, I also welcomed the opportunity to talk “publicly” with other faculty about teaching: Although many of the participants were new to teaching, they all knew more about teaching at Lafayette than I did. As I was discovering in my own classes, I could not just do the same things I had always done before, so it was helpful to hear my colleagues’ sense of what kind of work our students typically found interesting, challenging, or not worth doing.

As I was new to WAC work, I adapted what I knew about teaching composition and left myself open to learning from colleagues about writing in their disciplines. I discovered that, similar to working with students, working with faculty is more productive when I begin by soliciting their language and ways of knowing. For example, responding to student writing is an issue that causes anxiety for new and experienced teachers alike, so it is something we talked a lot about. I would, for example, distribute copies of a student paper and ask colleagues to comment on it as they would if the paper were by one of their own students. In this way, the conversation would begin (as it would when I asked students to comment on a classmate’s paper) with what the people in the group thought worth talking about. In this way, I could get a sense of what assumptions and expectations they brought to the table. A common criticism, for example, was that students just “can’t” write. But when I would
press this issue, it usually turned out to mean one of two things: students can’t compose a good thesis statement, or students make a lot of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling (“they don’t know the difference between its and it’s”). Such complaints are not, of course, specific to our students, but they do make it possible to have a conversation about the kinds of things that distinguish our students’ writing. Like a lot of college students, Lafayette students have received lots of contradictory advice about writing, and they struggle to put it together for themselves in ways that make sense. But our students are particularly good at figuring out what their teachers want—this is part of what makes them “successful.” So, a typical first-year student paper can look pretty smooth—an introduction and conclusion, paragraphs with topic sentences, minimal surface errors—and yet after four or five pages manages to spell out very little. In most cases, then, the fact that a paper “has no thesis” is just the tip of the iceberg.

As in my own classroom, I was working in these meetings against assumptions about teaching and learning that preceded my arrival at Lafayette. But I also discovered that my “outsider” status was useful. Unlike WPAs at many other small schools, I was neither the first nor the only compositionist; but I was the new one. So I took advantage of my position as someone learning on the job. Taking this position was particularly useful for getting faculty past the idea that certain assumptions (“students can’t write”) did not need further discussion. While I do not mean to suggest that small school faculty are more homogenous, there is a tendency to assume you already know what so-and-so will say because you’ve heard it all before. But I had not heard anything before, and no one had heard from me, so we had grounds to begin a conversation.

My goal in these meetings was—and continues to be—helping colleagues see student texts as worthy of serious critical investigation. After my first year here, when I was more familiar with the Writing Program and with my colleagues, I attempted to accomplish this by enlisting the help of our Writing Associates (WAs). WAs are undergraduate students, trained by our College Writing Program (CWP), to work with fellow students on their writing. Each WA is assigned to a specific class and serves as a liaison between the professor and the students. WAs are at the center of the writing program on our campus, responsible not only for facilitating student writing, but also for faculty development. Positioned as they are as both peer and professional-in-training, WAs help to make “public” the work and the teaching of writing on our campus. They teach fellow students to make the crucial transition from writer-based (private) to reader-based (public) prose. And they likewise help faculty imagine the audience for assignments and comments—giving them an “insider” view on how students are likely to read their intentions and hidden assumptions. From their training, WAs can find themselves in the position
of knowing more about the work of writing than the professors whose classes they are assigned to. Among our most successful students, WAs work well with their professors—carefully negotiating the boundary between the professor’s authority and their own expertise. And at a small school like ours where close student-faculty relationships are the norm, the “insider” prospective provided by our WAs can carry significant weight. Informed by articles like David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” and Min Lu’s “Professing Multiculturalism” that read student texts as rich and complex cultural documents, the WAs’ participation in faculty development meetings helps generate constructive conversation by complicating some of the common assumptions about student writers. WAs understand, for example, the kinds of struggles that might lurk behind a paper that simply appears to lack a “good thesis.” They know why it is important to see students as writers with individual literacy histories and why and how those histories manifest themselves in a student’s writing.

As I hope the above examples demonstrate, WPA work has been for me a process of leaning how to use some of the characteristic features of small school culture at my particular institution to productively—and publicly—trouble assumptions about teaching as a private affair and, consequently, foster intellectual conversation about writing (and also teaching and learning in general). As I see it, my job is less to offer advice about teaching with writing (though I will when asked) than to provide opportunities for my colleagues to think through their preconceptions about teaching with writing. Or at least that’s my job in theory. In practice, as I have also tried to show, it can be a bit more complicated. Some faculty who participate in these workshops find themselves in a vulnerable position: They’re teaching a new course, often experimenting with new material, and they’re teaching writing. But I also think the problem goes deeper than that. Our discussions about teaching writing often trouble convictions about teaching practices in general. A common concern, for example, is that teaching writing interferes with teaching the content of a course. “How much time do I have to spend on writing?” I am often asked, as if how students write—i.e., how students represent in writing what they know—is somehow separate from what they know, as if writing is a by-product of learning rather than a tool students might use to learn. To see writing as a means to knowing rather than the end of knowing can really shift the dynamic away from the kind of classroom where, as Freire puts it, the “teacher teaches and the students are taught” (73). It necessarily disrupts the notion that knowledge travels in one direction from teacher to students. It makes students active participants, and it better equips them to speak back to the teacher and to one another.

In calling attention to these complications, I do not mean to suggest that my colleagues are opposed to empowering students in these ways. Given that anonymity in a small community like ours is hard to come by, it is not surpris-
ing that faculty are reluctant to see their vulnerability teaching new courses as anything but a liability. Moreover, as faculty-WA discussions at the workshops have demonstrated, my colleagues value intellectual conversation and debate with their students. My point is that the function of writing in a given course is always already a loaded subject: we’re never only talking about teaching writing; we’re going public, in a sense, with our convictions about teaching, with who we are and why we do what we do in the classroom.

And this is a hard thing to do--especially when, in spite of the best efforts of the College Writing Program, the professional rewards for faculty interested in the intellectual work of teaching remain dubious and the stakes high.

IV.

As Salvatori and Kameen contend in “The Teaching of Teaching,”

An intractable ambivalence about the nature, the function and the worth of teaching pervades our profession. It is systemic. It is ubiquitous. And it is dysfunctional. Seldom brought fully into the light of critical argument, it surreptitiously emerges, hydra-like in sites and circumstances where it is often expedient or strategic to overlook it. (103-104)

At a small, private college like mine whose mission is defined by its faculty’s commitment to teaching, this ambivalence, I want to argue, can be particularly difficult to see. With all of our resources for faculty development and enhancement of teaching, for example, it is difficult to argue that more attention should be paid to teaching. Low student-faculty ratios reinforce the notion that students receive personal attention. Students can choose to work one-on-one with professors in honors or independent studies. We also have the EXCEL Scholars Program in which students work much like graduate assistants, helping professors conduct research and sometimes co-authoring articles for publication. Faculty-student projects are regularly featured on the Lafayette College home page and other public-relations publications.

On the surface, we appear to be paying a lot of attention to teaching. But, I would suggest, it is not the only kind of attention we ought to pay to the most important activity we hold in common. Teaching here, as I have tried to show in this essay, is oddly positioned between public performance and private experience, and this ambiguity can sometimes make it hard to talk productively about teaching. Good teaching is recognized and rewarded here. But thinking about how good teaching happens (an assistant professor, for example, thinking about how to revise her teaching practice) is considered (in theory) a private
matter. Outside of our CWP workshops, most of the other serious conversations about pedagogy happen for the purposes of promotion, tenure, or review. This makes it very hard in those workshops to have a conversation about the real work of teaching, which involves struggle, difficulty, and sometimes failure. Faculty here are not used to seeing such things as opportunities for reading the text of their classroom. Consequently, there is a kind of privacy surrounding classroom practice that, I think, interferes not only with what we might learn from one another, but with what a small college like ours could ultimately contribute to scholarship in teaching and learning.

Much of what I do as a teacher and WPA involves making visible the ways in which writing and teaching are not intuitive or idiosyncratic activities. And as I’ve tried to suggest, it may be harder to work against these assumptions at a small, liberal arts college: we recognize and pursue teaching and learning in very public ways, but imagine them, paradoxically, as essentially private activities. In the course of my time here, I have found myself betwixt and between these two notions of education—public celebration or performance, on one hand, and private experience, on the other. As a writing teacher and writing program administrator, I have, perhaps, been even more aware of this paradox because writing, itself, is never a wholly public or private affair, but rather a negotiating of public and private selves, ways of knowing and seeing.

Even though it may be harder to work against assumptions about the privacy of teaching at a small school like mine, ideal opportunities exist here for making teaching a really public affair, for creating what Salvatori and Donahue, in the article quoted at the beginning of this essay, describe as a “culture of teaching as intellectual work” (83). By this they mean “apply[ing] to talk and writing about teaching the same standards of professional accountability that govern more traditional scholarship in the field” (83). Such a culture might be fostered by some of those opportunities I have highlighted here. Close student-faculty relationships have tremendous potential for teaching us about the effectiveness of our teaching. From them we might learn more about how our students learn. And what we learn ought to be made available and evaluated in the same public venues as other kinds of scholarship. Small class sizes, too, create opportunities for experimenting with—and, again, studying and analyzing the effects of—strategies for student-centered learning. Finally, tremendous potential exists for interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty. I have never been more aware than I am now of the ways in which my pedagogy is positioned in relation to that of my colleagues, not in a competitive way, but in the sense that a WAC program at a small college offers obvious possibilities for thinking about teaching and learning across the curriculum. What would it mean to develop a language for talking about teaching across disciplines—for creating what Mary Huber and Sherwyn Morreale (quoting historian of science
Peter Gallison) identify as “trading zones”—“borderland[s] [where] scholars from different disciplinary cultures come to trade their wares—insights, ideas, and findings—even though the meanings and methods behind them may vary considerably among producer groups” (3)? As Huber and Morreale’s comments suggest, working toward that language might be even more valuable than the language itself: What new relationships might we come to perceive in the process between how and what we teach? What new possibilities might emerge along the way for alternative approaches? I think these are valuable questions for the profession at large, and I think the small, private liberal arts college is a good place to begin asking them.

Easton, PA

Notes
1 My essay, “The Ideology of Inspiration,” historicizes the emergence of this ideology and examines the relevance of that history for teaching reading and writing.

2 Paul Farber and Gunilla Holm explain that stories of charismatic teachers like Keating or Jaime Escalante in Stand and Deliver follow a pattern: an “educator-hero” who is not initially accepted by his students eventually gains their trust, and together they overcome personal and professional obstacles (13).


4 On the classroom as text, see Salvatori and Kameen: “To name the classroom as a text to be read and taught is to make the reading and teaching of that text eligible for the same critical interrogations with which we engage literary and theoretical texts” (103).

5 Last spring, for example, Andrea Lunsford was invited to campus to give a talk on plagiarism. Faculty were interested in having students attend, but few saw fit to attend themselves.

Works Cited


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