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My Perspective: Personal Beliefs Informing and Intersecting with Teaching Practice

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It all started on an ordinary Michigan day in February. The sky was the color of a Weimaraner, the texture of sodden cotton balls. The air that type of wet-cold, specific to the southeast corner of the state, that squeezes its icy fingers around your wrists and cheeks. I was teaching a section of freshmen composition this particular winter—the second class I'd ever taught. On this day, we were discussing genres of writing, and a student had mentioned an example of mythopoetic writing, specifically J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. While I have adopted and do enforce a policy of mutual respect for others' beliefs and opinions in my class, as soon as the books were mentioned, a second student snorted loudly. Interrupting the first student, the second student scoffed and denounced the books as biased and "Christian."

The point of tension arose because anything a student shares in class should be responded to respectfully and thoughtfully, and that was not happening here. As a non-denominational, Protestant Christian, my inner response was instantaneous, in terms of my personal beliefs, but it remained interior. As a teacher, however, I was at a loss with how to handle the heated religious debate that began to break out in my writing classroom, not because I was concerned only about the students, but because my job as a teacher puts me in a unique position of authority that demands respect for all my students, the ones I may agree with and the ones I may not.

From that one classroom moment on, I have been fascinated by the seen and unseen ways personal beliefs function in my writing classes. And as I set out to explore the realm of belief and the teaching of writing, I expected the division between them to be very clear-cut. However, of course, my personal beliefs inform my teaching practice! All it would take, I thought, was a little bit of investigating to see where exactly I could connect the dots, and voilà. In the process of exploration, however, I am finding how these perspectives connect to be much more complicated than originally expected. Answers are elusive: just when I discover one, I unearth a dozen more questions. While the exploration continues, here is what I'm noticing so far in the process of negotiating personal beliefs with my pedagogical stance:

1) We all have personal beliefs.
2) Our beliefs are in convergence/divergence with pedagogical theories, and hence inform which theories we agree/disagree with.
3) It is important for us as instructors to equip ourselves to negotiate the various situations where our personal beliefs create ridge points in our teaching practice.

As a graduate instructor, I have had several classroom experiences where my personal principles served to guide my choices regarding theory and practice. Through experiences like designing my own composition courses, I have been forced into a brisk stock-taking of personal beliefs and their application for the purposes of deciding everything from the ways I would set up teacher-student interactions in my class to the ways I would assess student writing. Every aspect of my teaching practice rests on theories that I've gleaned from readings, research, graduate instructors, and my own intuition or stance. Outside of the classroom, my personal beliefs influence my choices just as pervasively, if less tacitly, than my choices of theory or pedagogy. From my interactions with colleagues in the halls to my friendships, from my marriage to my volunteer work, everything I participate in is founded on personal principles or

beliefs that motivate and inform my practices.

As I grow in my identity as a teacher of writing, I am seeing that my personal beliefs inform my pedagogical choices, only much less visibly and without sufficient analytical vocabulary. In fact, I am seeing that the term "belief" is loaded with meanings, the connotations of which determine how it is applied. As teachers, we enter our classrooms with personal beliefs, dispositions, spiritual and religious convictions (or not), and these may fit well or collide with theories we study. In order to make sense of our own teaching practice, the theories that underlie it, and the beliefs—spiritual, moral and pedagogical—that inform both, we must set out to explore them. As we begin to examine the existing discourse surrounding personal belief and the teaching of writing, we begin to unpack terms, ideas and practicalities that at first may have seemed simple, simplistic, or at least, elicited a straightforward reaction within us. What will become important is the ability to reflect on these initial reactions, and to attempt to understand and resolve the tensions and subjectivities revealed in the process.

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So, What Do We Mean by "Belief"?

Through exploring the broader conversation, the vocabulary of personal principle, belief, and spirituality comes into focus. It is clear that not everyone in the field of composition agrees on one definition of the term "spirituality." Some, like James Moffett and Mary Rose O'Reilley, define it as a necessary awareness of the inner self, as can be facilitated through meditation, reflection, or prayer. Others, like Ann Goodburn, see it as associated with "religious identities" (333).

Either way, it seems clear, according to these authors, that spirituality refers to deeply personal motivations and practices that inform how students (and teachers) articulate their ideas in writing, as well as how they interact in a classroom setting. For example, Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald make this a key point in the beginning of their book, Reason to Believe, by stating, "Teachers who do not know the roots of their own beliefs and methods cannot act as persuasively as they might if they recognized their connections to a richly complicated past and examined how that past is used in current contexts" (3). They put the responsibility on their readers to examine their own beliefs in the context of not only the history of education in America, but in light of their own present teaching practices. Parker Palmer even more explicitly ties spirituality to teaching in a two-pronged perspective that holds 1) that humans are "spiritual" beings, and 2) that humans are capable of change. He applies these two ideas to teaching by sliding away from strictly defining spirituality at all: "What one names the core of the human being is of no real consequence to me," he says, "because no one can claim to know its true name. But that one names it is, I believe, crucial. For 'it' is the ontological reality of being human that keeps us from regarding ourselves, our colleagues, or our students as raw material to be molded into whatever form serves the reigning economic or political regime" (378).

In *The Garden at Night*, Mary Rose O'Reilley also acknowledges a certain amount of difficulty in defining the term "spirituality," but what she does do is draw a line between "religion" and "spirituality," explaining, "religion tends to be tied to institutional identifications, while spirituality is a more 'free-floating' term" (74). She also offers numerous examples of when spirituality is and is not at work in one's teaching. The former is exemplified by letting go of perfectionism in favor of deliberate acts of self care, like "being as crazy as you are" (59) and taking a nap (73). These and other examples are what O'Reilley calls "sustainable teaching" (57). On the other hand, disconnect between the spiritual and the rest of one's teaching leads to unsustainable, forced teaching, and ultimately, burnout. And O'Reilley patiently reminds us that this need not be the case, as she notes, "this inauthenticity [spiritual disconnect] introduce[s] a note of tension into the teaching day not present when one's work is congruent with one's deepest knowing" (18).

Linda Adler-Kassner furthers this point in *The Activist WPA*, when she talks about connecting personal principles to actions. "Regardless of the theories through which we work as WPAs or writing instructors," she says, "what we do is always rooted in our emotions, our ambitions, our goals" (22). Thus, Adler-Kassner clarifies the separate-but-connected bridge between the teacher's inner life and the outer theoretical choices. It can be a touchy subject, especially in the field of education, but as Adler-Kassner points out, the work of touching and even changing the lives of students, and through them, the face of our democracy, makes it worth examining:

> Change starts with individual principles—from an individual's anger, passions and (a concept uncomfortable to many academics, including me) emotions. It's about understanding one's self, and then connecting with others around one's own interests; ultimately, these connections lead to change-making movements. (23)

So, there is a range of definitions of belief that congregate around the idea of the teacher's inner life, deepest self, ontological reality, spirituality, personal principles, and identity. For myself, the individual principles Adler-Kassner describes are intertwined with my belief practice as a non-denominational Protestant Christian. For the purposes of this article and as a writing instructor, I will refer to belief in three distinct ways:

- spiritual beliefs, or one's inner life, including religious practices one engages in;
- moral beliefs, which are not necessarily religious but may have roots in one's spiritual beliefs, and which inform how one interacts with others;
- pedagogical beliefs, which are professional stances held in light of pedagogical theories, and that may be informed by one's moral and spiritual beliefs.

As we will see, each type of belief is made apparent in different ways in the life of the teacher, and finds its place in the broader conversation of the discipline.

Belief in the Broader Conversation

After reviewing literature across disciplines on the subject of personal beliefs and the teaching of writing, I have formulated a working definition of how personal beliefs inform writing instruction, including how belief has been conceptualized in the three discrete ways described above. Belief, in the practice of teaching, can be viewed from many perspectives; for the purpose of this article, I focus on the three that have emerged from the broader conversation.

1. Knowing—beliefs in the life of the writing teacher
2. Negotiating—beliefs of writing teacher and writing student interfacing
3. Applying— beliefs as a tool in pedagogical practice

Knowing—belief in the life of the writing teacher

Several authors who've examined issues of belief, faith and spirituality in the teaching of writing have chosen to focus on the personal spirituality of the writing teacher as support for teaching, yet still view it as somewhat outside the act of teaching. O'Reilley calls on the rich metaphors of her eclectic beliefs to inform a practice of "spiritual self care" for the burnt out, overwhelmed writing instructor (9):

> The psychologist Donald Winnicott helpfully questions whether professional life can survive anyone's best efforts to be whole. It's tempting to work this into a defense of the good person in the bad society, with oneself in the starring role, but instead I will just give it a big Minnesota whatever. Maybe I am the bad person in a good society, throwing swine before pearls, I don't know. It doesn't matter. What counts is that we come to understand the trap we are in and how our presuppositions about the nature of reality limit our perspective and cause us pain instead of working our liberation. (15)

Parker Palmer takes the same tack, but in a much more direct way. For Palmer, the inner of life of a teacher matters, simply because he sees teaching as a means of influence—which can be good or evil. He urges teachers to follow Socrates' example and avoid living an "unexamined life" (378). Spirituality, in Palmer's view, is a very loose term referring more to a teacher's identity and authenticity than any particular set of religious beliefs. Both Palmer and O'Reilley separate the focus on the teachers' spiritual

practices from the 'maddening crowds' of students in order to reengage with their teaching work in a refreshed way: faith as respite from, or supply for, teaching.

It is in this category that I would place a teacher's spiritual beliefs, for this is the most interior of the three perspectives. Here is where we as teachers find a source that serves to energize us, not only as teachers but as human beings. And it is here that there is room to take for granted those beliefs that supply us with our raison d'etre, which feeds our teaching even before we set foot on campus, and thus requires of us purposeful reflection.

Negotiating—beliefs of writing teacher and writing student interfacing

This is probably the richest area of research on the topic of beliefs and the teaching of writing, and holds not only aspects of a teacher's spiritual beliefs, but also his or her moral beliefs as well. For, it is here, as we begin to negotiate the interface between students and ourselves, that our inner identity comes into contact with others. Clashes occur in many ways, for many reasons, but can be most apparent when the spiritual and moral beliefs of the teacher come into tension with the spiritual and moral beliefs of the students. But, this tension is not necessarily something to be feared or even avoided; at the very least, it provides a rich area of investigation and dialogue. In her chapter "Coming to Terms with Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom," Elizabeth Vander Lei advocates for discussion of religious faiths in our classrooms, as preparation for students' interactions in the world beyond academia. She points out, "We are optimistic that when we seize the opportunities to teach students about the potential for religious faith to inspire and nurture effective rhetorical practice, we might help them become more engaged students and more effective citizens" (3).

Juanita Smart and Amy Goodburn aren't so sure. Goodburn's article, "A Question of Faith: Discourses of Fundamentalism and Critical Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom," addresses the frustrations of not being able to connect with students whose faith leads them to resistance in the classroom (335). Smart's experience is similar. In "Frankenstein or Jesus Christ: When the Voice of Faith Creates a Monster for the Composition Teacher," she discusses the complications of instructing a student whose faith leads him to write fervently about his faith, without fulfilling the assignment (12). Both Smart and Goodburn make visible their own beliefs, which play in tension with those of their students, and which also lead them to strive for connection with and understanding of their students.

This tension between students' and teachers' beliefs is also acknowledged by Lizabeth Rand who, in her article, "Enacting Faith: Evangelical Discourse and the Discipline of Composition Studies," makes the argument for an increase of religious discourse in composition classrooms. She takes a pragmatic stance, connecting religious discourse to the development of many (though of course not all) students as writers, human beings and citizens:

> I believe it would be useful for us as writing instructors to explore students in the composition classroom...in order to respond more effectively to [students], we would benefit from extended conversation of the ways that faith is 'enacted' in discourse and sustained through particular kinds of textual and interpretive practice. (350)

In any case, the negotiation between teachers and students in terms of the beliefs they hold, and beyond that, how to share and communicate those beliefs is still at the center of the conversation about belief in the composition classroom.

Applying—beliefs as a theoretical tool in pedagogical practice

As we begin knowing our own personal beliefs well enough to see how they inform our lives outside of and around teaching, we move into negotiating our beliefs with those of our students in an effort to co-construct meaning with them in our classrooms. This creates a need to examine how we apply our beliefs to the classroom. Thinking about my role as a composition instructor has led me to more fully understand my goals by examining my personal pedagogical beliefs, both for myself as a teacher and for my students.

For example, breaking down my classes to their most basic dynamic, I see two categories: the teacher as writer and the students as writers. I find that this is a pedagogical belief, influenced by my agreement with the

NCTE Guidelines about the Teaching of Writing ("Position Statement on the Teaching of Writing"), in that I believe that my students have the capacity to write, that writing can be taught, and that I, as their teacher, can help them become better writers. This is a key belief that shapes everything else in my classes, from the ways I interact with my students to the papers and projects I assign, right down to the ways I conceptualize my own writing process and the processes of my students. If I see my students as writers, and myself as a writer, then I begin to talk to them as fellow writers, sharing my work with them just as I ask them to share theirs with me, working with them towards growth in our writing.

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Another way that I apply my beliefs to my teaching is through a belief in student choice. As a teacher, I create lessons that revolve around students choosing their own research topics, community research sites, even their reading material. I do this because I believe that having choice in their work empowers students to engage more and to feel more invested. Is this directly connected to my spiritual beliefs? To my moral beliefs? Maybe not directly, though my spiritual beliefs and moral beliefs inform the way I see the world and my fellow human beings, which leads me to a certain understanding of why choice, or the idea that everyone can write, might be important. This connection is not as direct as that running between these aspects of my practice and the professional stance I've taken towards them because of my pedagogical beliefs, but it is there, and thus merits examination.

Considering How Belief Informs Us

On that chilly grey day in February, I ended up letting my class debate religious topics for a few minutes, interjecting in a firm tone that surprised even myself that, while the debate was thrilling and interesting, ours was not a world religions class. It was time to get back to the topic at hand: genres of writing and the assignment. I was surprised at myself for a couple of reasons. First, it is unlike me to cut off discussion in my class in such a way. Second, I found that my sudden burst of authority carried with it an intense undercurrent of emotion based in my personal beliefs. It was as if I hardly knew myself as a teacher and was desperate to move into more comfortable territory for the purposes of regaining that self-knowledge—that feeling of control over my own emotions, and in order to get back to my own classroom management practices.

While I have thought of many different ways I could have handled the situation, I can only learn from it and move forward, secure in the knowledge that I did what I thought was right and professional at the time. Though, I have not been able to shake the impetus to investigate the tensions that I saw, and felt within myself, so as to better understand myself, and my students. I feel that this understanding will facilitate my growth as a teacher, to be able to handle tensions that arise in my classroom in ways that can engender teaching moments and create more areas learning for my students. That day sparked a fire in me to continue exploring the ways my own beliefs interact with and inform my teaching practice.

Questions to Bridge the Gap

There is a gap in the research that can be addressed with a two-fold line of questioning: first, how can we further address the ideas that have heretofore been only touched on regarding the incorporation of all three perspectives of belief and the teaching of writing? The discussion so far examines each perspective of Knowing, Negotiating, and Applying individually, but has not fully explored the delicate and complex interactions between them. The questions that we as teachers can ask in order to fill this gap are:

- How can we enter into the conversation, listen, and attempt to understand students?
- How can we work towards knowing our own spiritual beliefs, negotiating them, along

with our moral beliefs, in relation to our students, and apply spiritual and moral beliefs appropriately to our pedagogical beliefs?

This is the process that will take us to the next step of synthesizing the complexities of our various beliefs and our teaching practice. There is a second set of questions I see that can help fill the gap:

- Since much of the literature takes the point of view of more experienced, even tenured faculty, how can we further address these ideas from the point of view of first and second year composition instructors?
- How can beginning instructors reflect more purposefully on our beliefs to help us shape our understanding of our teaching practice?
- How can experienced instructors work with first and second year instructors to help guide and facilitate reflection?

It is important for all of us in the field to be self-reflective about our beliefs in regard to our teaching, but perhaps especially important for those of us beginning a teaching life. There is no way to prepare ourselves for every challenging situation we may encounter in the classroom. What we can do is practice self-reflection in order to equip ourselves with the means to practice knowing, negotiating and applying our personal beliefs in our teaching. That way, when a ridge point or a tension becomes visible, we have a more thorough understanding of ourselves as teachers to be able to navigate it with confidence.

What Becomes Important: Revision and Reflection

What I'm coming to understand is that it is immensely important for us as teachers to acknowledge our personal beliefs and to analyze where they are rooted, and how they affect our teaching practice. This continues to be an ongoing process of negotiating with oneself about one's personal beliefs, recognizing that throughout a teaching career, spiritual beliefs, moral beliefs and pedagogical beliefs may change. But continual change in our profession is healthy: it is growth; it is to be expected. We revise our teaching just as we revise our writing and ask our students to learn revision practices. We reflect on our beliefs and our teaching process just as we ask our students to reflect on their writing processes. We practice on ourselves. These revision and reflection practices are important because we have a position of pouring into young lives—as Elizabeth Buckhold pointed out in the last issue of *LAJM* in her article "Making them Grateful: Bringing Positive Reflection into the Classroom": we can help our students form an outlook on the world, and on themselves.

It is important that we make visible—to ourselves—where our personal stakes are driven, so that we can negotiate and apply our beliefs in our classrooms. It is important that we model for our students the practices we teach. Filling in the gaps where we see them, by attempting to answer the questions about our personal beliefs and how they inform our teaching practices, is a way that we can make visible what is not yet being fully discussed in our field, and in our classrooms.

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