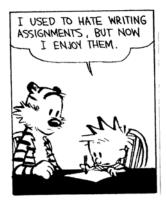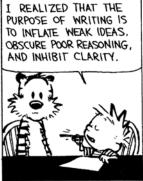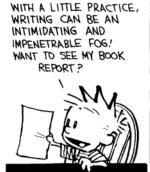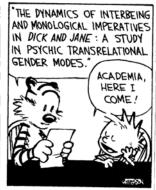Laura Ambrose
Teaching Philosophy Statement
May 2007

  As a literary scholar, I respond both with laughter and trepidation to the insight provided by the least likely of sources in the comic above. Despite their biting critique, the contradictions that lace these frames engender laughter because they speak some truth. Calvin's sense that writing and thought processes are most celebrated when they "inflate weak ideas," "inhibit clarity," and form an "intimidating and impenetrable fog," calls attention to the challenge of our own cultural and pedagogical moment in which some students imagine success in their English courses in precisely these ways. As an educator, I am troubled by the ways in which students might read our "love" of literature and language as a form of impenetrability and, as Calvin suggests, an "inflation" of something that really isn't there. Many students envision communities of readers as a kind of "Dead Poet's Society"– exclusive, reclusive, "secret" groups of privileged, gifted individuals. Far from closing gates of access, though, the goal of the college literature classroom is to empower, inspire, and inform growing communities of readers, thinkers, and citizens. As such, I shape my teaching around notions of access – access to the formal elements and historical contexts shaping sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature; access to the "tricks," nuances, and strategies of writing about difficult texts; and access to the material for students with different learning styles, disciplinary focuses, and educational backgrounds. Providing students the skills and opportunities to recognize both the potentials and pitfalls of linguistic construction and "obscurity" – whether artfully woven into a Spenserian stanza or quietly laced into the pages of "news" articles – stands as one of the greatest privileges of this profession.

  In my literature classroom, students learn to identify and make meaning of linguistic constructions through a variety of means. While the traditional argumentative "English essay" has its merits, large class discussion, small group work, paired exchanges, and individual presentations ask students to practice their reading skills in a variety of contexts. I have had particular success with a small group assignment that asks students to draw the scene in which Desdemona is murdered in *Othello*. The task demands careful close reading of the scene itself – its language, imagery, and scant stage directions. Discussion of these theatrical sketches further extends the learning process by asking students to transfer the visual back into the discursive by explaining their creative choices, often in light of the scenes designed by their peers. In asking students to render their interpretation of Shakespeare's play through drawing, I offer them a more accessible point of entry into the text's potentially difficult language while simultaneously maintaining high standards regarding the interpretation of the language itself.

The written word, nonetheless, remains the keystone of the English classroom. Students must practice its craft, analyze its symbolic value, and deploy it with enthusiasm and ease in discussion. In an effort to help students develop a natural, confident relationship to language – in reading and in writing – I candidly and firmly acknowledge that writing is *hard* and requires regular, rigorous intellectual energy and commitment. Students quickly learn the critical importance of frequent practice and reflection. With first-year students of composition, for example, we hold class in the computer lab for several weeks in which students take notes, workshop assignments using e-editing, and work on group-generated writing tasks – all designed to get students to reflect on alternative possibilities for effective writing. In addition, practices of electronic editing and composition raise students' awareness of their own privileged access to these technologies, thereby serving as ideal catalysts for discussion on topics such as the digital divide and globalization. Digital technology has also served as an effective pedagogical tool in my literature classroom in which students contributed weekly posts to a course blog (http://mblog.lib.umich.edu/timetravel/). For students of early modern English literature, in particular, blogs have compelling and exciting relationships to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practices of reading, writing, publishing, and manuscript circulation. Blogs provide access to a low-stakes, "grammar free" writing space in which students work through (rather than produce) obscurity, generate complex thoughts about readings *through* the process of writing (rather than through thinking alone), and develop their own community or "society" of literary minds through "e-scholarship" and online conversation.

As an instructor, the blog also provided myriad weekly opportunities for me to assess (rather than formally evaluate) the students' interests, overall learning progress, and questions regarding the readings. Because my pedagogical goals cohere around notions of access, clarity, and availability, I provide all of my classes with an anonymous midterm feedback form with both specific and open-ended inquiries into class topics, lessons, assignments, and discussions. In addition, students meet with me frequently outside of class to discuss any aspect of the course (writing goals and challenges, particular passages, etc.) throughout the term (not, as is the tendency with many undergraduates, immediately prior to a due date). Together with more formal evaluative assignments (short and long papers, presentations, and quizzes), these feedback opportunities provide me with critical access to my students and the scope of their learning.

In both the literature and composition classrooms, I view my role in addressing the variety of student interests and learning styles as both a pedagogical challenge and a valuable resource. Getting students to reflect on the knowledge that they bring to the table is as useful to the learning process as their efforts to improve and expand this knowledge. During one class in the first week of the term, I ask students to become experts in their own disciplines or past writing experiences, inviting them to "teach" the class how to write a successful paper in biology, history, engineering, business, or any other area of their choice. Inevitably, students isolate the critical, necessary components that their writing shares: introducing a topic, using evidence, explaining that evidence, organizing ideas logically, and expressing thoughts clearly. Equally important in this process of verbal exchange, though, is the opportunity for students to see the essay mapped out visually and spatially on the board – a skill they are also encouraged and expected to hone in the process of writing their own papers and projects throughout the term. Later in the term, the visual component of literary analysis and argument becomes especially effective as an alternative means of exploring argumentation in magazine advertisements, graphic (comic strip) essays, and images of seventeenth-century play texts and woodcuts.

I strive to clear the "impenetrable fog" for students, to empower them with skills of analysis, questioning, and reflection, and to broaden the community of thinkers and writers invested in, adept at and driven by the creative and rhetorical power of language – regardless of whether or not they echo Calvin's own satiric sentiment, "Academia, here I come!"