

# *From the Guest Editors*

## **Conceptions of Work in the College Literacy Classroom: Building our Collective Capacity for Reflective Professional Practice**

**Connie Kendall Theado**

University of Cincinnati

**Samantha NeCamp**

University of Cincinnati

---

Our work is what unites those of us who read this journal: we are connected by our shared interest in and commitment to literacy learning in the college classroom. How we imagine that work, though—its scope and its boundaries—is as varied as the institutions in which we work and the students with whom we share our classrooms. As we explained in our initial Call for Proposals, this special issue focuses on how our conceptions of “work” in the college literacy classroom impact the people, the labor(ing), the documents, the physical space, and the imagined future workplaces that are present within it, as well as the administrative structure and larger college environment within which such work operates.

While the meaning of work has long been a focus of composition scholarship—the author of our Afterword, Bruce Horner,

published his foundational book on the subject, *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, in 2000—we joined this conversation relatively recently, inspired by seeing our students imagine their future work as they make their way through our courses at the University of Cincinnati. For the past five years, we have been teaching together in the Postsecondary Literacy Instruction (PLI) Certificate Program, where we work with graduate students—most of whom are already successful practicing teachers in this and other fields—who want to build their capacity to teach adult literacy learners in a variety of postsecondary contexts (e.g., two- and four-year colleges, community adult literacy programs, technical schools, and so forth). As we watch our students bring their experiences as educators to bear on the fundamental questions of literacy learning, we are struck by

the ways in which their beliefs about the work they do now shape the ways in which they imagine their future as college writing and reading teachers. In comparing our notes about how students interact with the PLI program's curriculum, we also found ourselves examining our own work as collaborators in developing that curriculum; in particular, we were eager to explore how our work in composing assignments affected the kinds of reflective work students carried out in the classroom. This exploration, in turn, has led us to more consciously consider our differing ways of working as we pursue extracurricular collaborative writing projects together. In short, we found our ideas about work spinning webs that seemed to entangle all aspects of our lives as teachers and scholars. In framing our Call around the concept of work, then, we hoped that our respondents would help us tap into these multiple lines of inquiry and the connections among them.

The result has been even more productive than we had hoped. The six articles featured in this special issue consider work with both student and teacher perspectives in mind—from a tight focus on instructional practices used with college readers and writers to the broader lenses of programmatic administration, faculty collaboration and co-mentoring, and issues surrounding assessment. For instance, Rebecca A. Powell and Joyce Olewski Inman's article, "Resisting Meritocracy: Students' Conceptions of Work at a Regional University," as well as Kelly Blewett's contribution, "Conceptions of Work in First-Year Writing: A Case Study," speak directly to our initial question about how students conceive of their work as literacy learners and the impact those conceptions have on the work that we (can) do as teachers. In his article, "Illuminating Reading as Intellectual Labor: Cultivating Readerly Behaviors in the Writing

Classroom," Zack K. De Piero examines how first-year writing TAs envision their work as literacy educators and how those understandings impact their pedagogical choices. Logan Bearden's piece, "Transformative Programs, Transformed Practice: Multiliteracies and the Work of the Composition Program," addresses how our beliefs about what the work of the composition classroom should be influences our programmatic decision-making and frameworks, while Sonya L. Armstrong and Concetta A. Williams call for a broad shift in how the field conceptualizes reading assessment and evaluation in their essay, "Reconceptualizing the Work of Assessment: Toward a Culture of Inquiry." For their part, M. Amanda Moulder and Sophie Bell consider the implications of how sustained collaborative work with fellow teachers enriches pedagogical practice and builds coherence across writing programs in their article, "Collaborative Co-Mentoring: Building Horizontal Alliances through Faculty Development." In each article, the authors focus intently on how we conceive of our work as literacy teachers and scholars; yet, each approaches the concept from a very different set of foundational understandings and beliefs.

Taking our cue from the efforts of these scholars, we return to the initial scene that inspired the focus of this issue. Below, we provide a brief case study of our own experiences that we see as uniting, in many ways, the disparate threads taken up by the articles featured here. We share a story of a co-mentoring relationship akin to the support system Moulder and Bell describe. We share a story of deliberate and reflective program development that speaks to the kinds of unified programmatic action Bearden heralds. We share a story of asking both our students and ourselves to reflect on our beliefs about writing, teaching, and

assessment, engaging in the kinds of self-aware praxis for which De Piero, Blewett, Armstrong and Williams, and Powell and Inman advocate. While this test case is perhaps an unconventional introduction to a special issue such as this, we hope this example of our work in the PLI classroom will serve as a jumping-off point for both disciplinary and individual reflections on the meaning of work in the college literacy classroom.

### **Creating a Common Assignment: The “Declaration of Principles” as a Test Case**

The Postsecondary Literacy Instruction (PLI) Certificate Program consists of a six-course sequence. One course in the program is Writing Methods, which focuses on current and foundational texts in basic writing studies and helps students conceptualize their own classroom practices as writing teachers. Connie directs the PLI Program and initially designed the curriculum for this class; Samantha now teaches the Writing Methods course annually. While instructors within the PLI Program do not have a structured shared curriculum, the integrated nature of the six courses relies to some extent on a consistent set of assignments. Thus, Samantha uses many of Connie’s existing assignments to ensure unity across the program.

The first and last assignments of the Writing Methods course are a two-part reflection assignment called “A Declaration of Principles” (See Appendix). For their initial foray into this two-part writing project, students are asked to use John Dewey’s (1897) essay, “My Pedagogic Creed,” as a model for crafting five statements of belief about the project and promise of higher education, in general, and about the teaching of writing within these contexts, more particularly. In the final course assignment, students are asked to

revisit their early statements of belief in light of the readings and classroom conversations across the full stretch of the semester and to reflect on the extent to which their beliefs have been challenged, changed, refined, or reinforced along the way.

When she originally developed the assignment, Connie was guided by the pedagogical lessons gleaned from her study of first-generation American pragmatist philosophers—C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey—who rejected the idea of a theory/practice split to assert instead the necessity of squaring our beliefs about the world with our actions in the world in order to effect transformative social change. She was also mindful of Ann Berthoff’s (1979/1981) cautionary advice to English teachers everywhere that learning to write and, by extension, learning to teach writing are rhetorical practices that call for “theoretical consideration, not just recipe swapping” (p. 68). Connie also drew inspiration from the scholarship of her own teaching mentors and models—notably Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly—whose observation that “when teachers are able to name their own beliefs, they are able to act on them effectively and confidently” (Roskelly & Ronald, 1998, p. 162) makes explicit the critical link between the theory and practice of teaching writing: reflection. In creating this two-part assignment, then, Connie sought to provide students with a writing activity that could cultivate this teacherly capacity for reflection, the cornerstone of what Paulo Freire (1970) called “praxis.”

When Samantha began teaching the course, she kept the essentials of the assignment the same to preserve the continuity among the program’s courses: students were still required to compose “I believe” statements using Dewey as a model. The beauty of Connie’s assignment

description, Samantha reasoned, was that even as it asked students to identify their own beliefs, the assignment spoke directly to Connie's beliefs and how those beliefs were shaped; in particular, Connie's experience with her mentors shaped both her approach to teaching and her assignment frame. It would have been disingenuous of Samantha to try to frame the assignment in the same way. To make the assignment her own, then, Samantha first completed the assignment. In other words, she crafted her own statements of belief about teaching, writing, and the work of the composition classroom. What she found was that her beliefs about teaching and writing weren't very specific to teaching and writing *per se*. Instead, Samantha's approach in the classroom is informed by the set of beliefs and values that govern all her actions. She needed an external frame, then, which emphasized that teaching and writing can't be neatly separated from who we are as people, even as the core of the assignment remained the same. After all, she thought, in the end, it's just a job: an important, meaningful job, but still a job. This led Samantha to Mike Rowe, the host of the television program *Dirty Jobs*—and perhaps one of the most distinctive voices addressing what it means to work in the U.S. Notably, one of Rowe's most-shared statements on work emphasizes the role of belief in making our work meaningful—"Happiness does not come from a job. It comes from knowing what you truly value and behaving in a way that's consistent with those beliefs" (2014, para. 19)—which connected well with the values Samantha intended to tap into via the assignment. Samantha also felt that choosing Rowe would illustrate to students that high-culture influences are not required; everything that we do, all our cultural sources, may positively influence how we experience our world and our work.

### **Building Capacity for Action: The Benefits of Reflective Practice for Students and Teachers**

Like all learning, finding our place as teachers in the college writing classroom is a process: uneven, evolving, ongoing. And like all learning, success depends on our commitment to engage intentionally with this process. On this point, Wendy Bishop's (2003) observations are especially useful:

I do not believe I can have a smorgasbord pedagogy, but I do feel entitled to range widely, as a teaching generalist, as a writing specialist. Then I'm obliged to think systematically about my practice. . . . I'm obliged to define, refine, name, and explain my practice and to build new knowledge from which to set out again. It is the building and the appreciating and the setting out strongly that matter to me. (p. 75)

Encouraging teachers to recognize reflection as a deliberate, active, and iterative process rooted in, as Bishop suggests, a felt obligation to "think systematically"—that is, theorize—about our practice lies at the heart of the Declaration of Principles writing assignment. Inviting our PLI Program students to more fully account for who they are as teachers in the writing classroom by way of articulating—or, as Roskelly and Ronald (1998) put it, "knowing and naming"—what they believe builds capacity for action.

On the whole, our graduate students—who are themselves already experienced teachers—responded enthusiastically to the assignment. To be sure, many took the opportunity to voice their frustrations with teaching, but these were not framed simply as complaints but rather as beliefs about how we—as a field and as individual educators—can do better. In this sense, the assignment worked to elicit reflection on

both a personal, practitioner level and on a much broader level including the discipline as a whole. They reflected on their past and current teaching experiences, and they identified the kinds of practices that were working and not working in their classrooms. Because these were statements of belief, students were required to take these critiques and frame them in proactive terms: what, then, did they believe needed to be done to improve the situation? In their explanations, they shared the experiences that led them to see that changes were needed and drew on their beliefs to reframe solutions to these dilemmas.

In particular, the Declaration of Principles assignment elicited two commonly held beliefs shared by students in both Connie's and Samantha's sections. First, these teachers expressed the belief that writing assignments need to have clear relevance to their students' lives and interests. Secondly, many expressed the belief that writing is a way of finding one's voice, both for themselves as they worked to complete in their graduate coursework, and for the students whom they were teaching. By first naming their beliefs about writing and writing instruction, and then exploring how those beliefs might be more fully squared with their practice, these students also began to imagine new ways in which they could both claim their own voice as teachers and model voice for their students as well.

The Declaration of Principles assignment also succeeded in creating a classroom environment conducive to sustained reflective activity, providing a touchstone against which students could read the various competing texts and theories presented throughout the semester. In revisiting the initial assignment at the end of the course, few students noted dramatic changes in their beliefs—after all, as experienced teachers, their beliefs already

had a firm foundation in practice. Instead and, we would argue, more importantly, students were better able to explain why they believed what they believed and articulate more precisely how these beliefs could be enacted in a classroom context with the limitations it entails.

The benefits of this work for us, as classroom teachers, are also worth noting. By working within the framework of Connie's assignment but revising to reflect her own beliefs, Samantha gained a deeper understanding of the principles informing her teaching and how these are enacted in her assignment design. In comparing notes with each other regarding our students' written products, we both reflected on the ways in which our assignment design affected—and did not affect—the kind of responses students provided. For instance, Samantha's design tended to invite calls for changes to how teachers can exercise their agency within the classroom, both in terms of freedom of course design and freedom of expression within the classroom. When reminded that this is a job, a choice of profession, Samantha noticed that her students focused intently on what might drive them away from choosing to perform it and then sought to alter those conditions. In contrast, Connie's assignment tended to invite calls for change in teacher preparation programs, like disrupting the familiar theory into practice sequencing of learning objectives and coursework to include a more explicit practice into theory perspective, where innovative instructional practices are viewed as able to reinvent staid educational theory and the teaching-learning transaction is valued as both experiential and experimental. In both cases, we received careful, frank reflections regarding why students and teachers do what they do in the writing classroom, and these reflections inspired a continuous conversation in which students challenged and encouraged one

another to use those reflections to create positive change in their home institutions.

We believe that a Declaration of Principles writing assignment like the one we describe here is useful because it provides a concrete opportunity for teachers and students to engage in reflection throughout the term and incorporate new learning into their existing frameworks in a deliberate and careful way. Just as importantly, we found the process of examining how each of us constructed this shared writing assignment instructive for improving our own teaching, as it allowed us to trace the impacts of our beliefs and the instantiation of those beliefs in our course documents—to see, quite directly, the role our framing choices played in the kinds of responses we received. This form of collaboration is an opportunity that is perhaps too little recognized in programs utilizing shared curricula: when teachers compare notes and engage in reflective conversations around the responses to common assignments, we can better understand how our individual voices shape our classrooms and how curricular constraints succeed—or not—in creating similar, and similarly effective, learning experiences for students.

In its ability to reorient us to our practice, to render the beliefs underwriting our actions in the classroom both more open to examination and, thus, more available to revision, reflection is an always already forward-facing enterprise. And if what matters most in a teaching life is finally, as Bishop (2003) suggests, an ability to “define, refine, name, and explain” our practice in order to “build new knowledge from which to set out again” (p.75), then cultivating our capacity for reflection is the critical first step.

### **Conceptions of Work in the College Literacy Classroom: A Quick Preview**

We believe that each one of the 25 contributors to this special issue of the *Journal of College Literacy and Learning (JCLL)* are playing an important role in building the field’s collective capacity for reflective professional practice. In addition to the six featured articles described earlier, this issue also includes a forum titled “Views from the Field” that brings together seven short essays showcasing the wide range and diversity of perspectives about the issue’s theme. These essays—from Michael Blancato, Gavin P. Johnson, Beverly J. Moss, and Sara Wilder; Ed Nagelhout; Laurie Bauer; Joanne Rose Andres Castillo, Claudia Itzel Sauz Mendoza, Romeo García, and Christie Toth; Alice Horning; Deborah Kellner; and Brenda Helmbrecht and Dan Reno—offer a set of diverse yet connected discussions on what it means to do work in our field, providing both classroom and programmatic perspectives on the work that takes place in college reading and writing classrooms and encouraging us to align our work in the classroom with our beliefs about what is most just, ethical, and fruitful for our students’ learning. Following the forum, Vanessa Kraemer Sohan’s book review of Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau’s (2017) *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom* presents an assortment of standpoints on the work reading performs in our classrooms. To close the issue, Bruce Horner’s Afterword asks us to reimagine what the work of college literacy and learning should be.

Finally, we want to thank *JCLL* Editors, Deborah Kellner and Laurie Bauer, for offering us this wonderful opportunity to serve as guest editors and providing helpful advice along the way, and *JCLL* Associate Editor, Lou Ann Sears, for keeping us organized and managing the submission and review processes so deftly. Their generous guidance and support truly made this special issue possible.

## References

- Berthoff, A. E. (1981). Learning the uses of chaos. In Ann E. Berthoff, *The making of meaning: Metaphors, models, and maxims for writing teachers* (pp. 68-72). Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers. (Reprinted from *Reinventing the rhetorical tradition*, A. Friedman & I. Pringle (Eds.), May 1979. Ottawa: L&S Books and Canadian Council of Teachers of English).
- Bishop, W. (2003). Because teaching composition is (still) mostly about teaching composition. In Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald A. Daiker, and Edward M. White (Eds.), *Composition studies in the new millennium: Rereading the past, rewriting the future* (pp. 65-77). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogic creed. *The School Journal*, 54(3), 77-80.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Menand, L. (2001). *The metaphysical club: A story of ideas in America*. New York: Farber, Strauss and Giroux.
- Roskelly, H., & Ronald, K. (1998). *Reason to believe: Romanticism, pragmatism, and the teaching of writing*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Rowe, M. (2014, April 19). Saturday mail call. <https://www.facebook.com/TheRealMikeRowe> [Facebook update]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/TheRealMikeRowe/posts/773954069281405>
- Sullivan, P., Tinberg, H., & Blau, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

## Appendix

### A Declaration of Principles: A Writing Assignment in Two Parts

#### Connie's Assignment

#### Writing Project 1: A Declaration of Principles

Focus text: Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogic creed. *The School Journal*, 54(3), 77-80.

#### *A story and some opening comments:*

In 1872, a group of New England philosophers sat around a table discussing a question that had long troubled their field: What is the definition of belief? The story goes that a member of the group offered up Alexander Bain's definition for consideration: A belief, he suggested, is something upon which one is prepared to act. And it was this single, simple sounding definition, a statement that established a clear link between belief and action, between knowing and doing, that would form the basis for a new tradition in American philosophy—pragmatism—and join together a disparate group of thinkers—C.S. Peirce, William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Dewey—who were, according to social historian Louis Menand, “more responsible than any other group for moving North American thought into the modern world” (*The Metaphysical Club*, p. xi).

I have always liked this story. It reminds me of the power that inheres in communities of thinkers, and so it reminds me of the importance of the journey we're about to undertake together as we begin thinking through the methods for and meanings of basic writing instruction on college campuses. But it's not just the story that I like so well. Instead, I confess that I'm drawn more deeply to the force of their ideas about this link between belief and action, between what (we think) we know *about* the world—our theories, our propositions of what's true or false, right or wrong, good or bad—and what we actually *do* in the world. Certainly, there is a lesson here for us; that is, a lesson for teachers. *How do our ideas, our beliefs, about the project and promise of higher education matter to our practice, our pedagogies, our daily work with students? What difference do our ideas or beliefs about language and literacy and the teaching of writing make in the world? And always more importantly, what difference do these ideas make in any one of our student's actual life?* These are the kinds of questions I'm asking you to consider as you compose this first writing project.

Near the end of their book, *Reason to Believe*, composition theorists Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald suggest that “when teachers are able to name their own beliefs, they are able to act on them effectively and confidently” (p. 162). Roskelly and Ronald know a lot about pragmatism and rhetoric. They also know a lot about teaching. The stress they lay upon knowing and naming our pedagogical beliefs arises out of their years of studying figures like Peirce and James and Dewey—teachers, all. In asking each of you to compose your own “Declaration of Principles,” I'm clearly taking my lead from Roskelly and Ronald, who took their lead from pragmatist philosophers like Dewey and his famous pronouncement of principles, “My Pedagogic Creed.” We should begin this journey together, I think, by taking a moment to articulate—to know and to name—our beliefs about the meaning of higher education in its multiple and often fraught connections with our theories about language and literacy (the two are not the same), identity and community, so that we may in fact and indeed act on our beliefs effectively and confidently in our classrooms.

*The assignment in more definite terms:*

- Read Dewey’s “My Pedagogic Creed.” If you can, read it in advance of the first week of classes and just let his words linger in your mind as you get on with the rest of your life, your daily routine. Dewey didn’t write his “Creed” in a day; he drew upon years of thinking and teaching and believing in the scope of his daily life well before he ever put pen to paper.
- When you are ready to begin composing, revisit “My Pedagogic Creed” and notice again those ideas or perspectives or attitudes that seem to resonate with your own. Dewey’s text focuses primarily on schools, while our focus is trained on postsecondary classrooms, but don’t let that throw you – ideas, perspectives, and attitudes about the project of education, in general, easily cross the structural boundary between K-12 and postsecondary classrooms. In addition, notice again the cadence of Dewey’s language, the way he begins each statement with the phrase “I believe,” and consider the rhetorical force that using that sort of bold, clear phrasing has for his audience.
- Start by simply jotting some notes about what you believe about higher education (the concept and the institution), about students generally and about basic writing students more particularly, about language and literacy in relation to self, community and society at large, about teaching and classrooms and what goes on (or doesn’t go on but should?) in colleges. In other words, generate a list of thoughts and beliefs that speak to the concerns of writing teachers in postsecondary settings. Commit to your ideas. Use Dewey’s phrasing: Begin each statement with “I believe.” Think about the force of those words for your readers.
- Compose your Declaration of Principles. Create a list of *5 statements of belief* – more if you want to, but not less. State your belief (“I believe...”) and then expand on it, elaborate it, develop it, complicate it, interpret it. In other words, know it. Express your belief in such a way that your readers will understand or come to know it, too. There is no pre-determined page limit for this writing project. For those of you who want more direction, however, a good rule of thumb is this: Follow-up each of your 5 statements of belief with 1 solid paragraph of discussion.
- *Post one statement of belief – and the commentary that surrounds it – to our discussion forum by Tuesday of Week 1.* We’ll use these as a way of introducing ourselves to each other, of announcing ourselves to each other, really, and of inviting others to notice who we are by way of what we believe.
- *Submit a final version of your Declaration of Principles as an attachment by email sent to me by the due date (the end of Week 1).* Please remember to keep a copy for yourselves. We’ll revisit and revise these early statements of belief at the end of the course as part of the final writing project.

Samantha’s Assignment

A Declaration of Principles: Or, What I Believe about Writing and Its Teaching

*Happiness does not come from a job. It comes from knowing what you truly value, and behaving in a way that’s consistent with those beliefs. –Mike Rowe*

On the one hand, I wish I could start with a quotation that carries a bit more cultural capital. On the other hand, there are few people in the world more qualified to speak to how we work in the U.S. than Mike Rowe, former host of the Discovery Channel’s *Dirty Jobs*. I think it’s important to start my

own declaration of principles regarding teaching and writing with this quotation, as it highlights two important features of those acts for me. First, that it *is a job*. No matter how many teacher recruitment efforts may paint teaching as a calling, and no matter how many moments we have in the classroom that feel truly transcendent, the in-between times are still work; like any other job, there will be moments filled with compromises minor and major, petty annoyances (the darn printer is acting up again, and I have 25 syllabi to print out in the next 10 minutes!), and difficult working relationships. There will be times when we question why it is that we're in this classroom. As Mike Rowe suggests, it's not the myth that our job should bring us happiness that will get us through those moments—indeed, such a myth is part of what makes those moments so difficult to bear. Instead, the second important feature that this quotation emphasizes is the importance of having a clear sense of what it is we intend to do here and what it is we hope to accomplish. That clarity of goals, intentions, and ethical commitments can guide us through those difficult moments, and just as importantly, can give us a concrete point of return with which to consider the successes and failures of our teaching and learning. Are we enacting pedagogies that reflect our beliefs?

As such, you might begin this assignment by asking why it is that you're here in this class. What are your short-term and long-term goals, and how do those inform your beliefs about what it means to teach, to write, and to teach writing, particularly at the college level?

This assignment is modeled on John Dewey's declaration of principles, *My Pedagogic Creed*. You can find it at the following link, and I strongly urge you to skim through, at least, before embarking on your own declaration. No need to read every word: I want you to look for structure more so than ideas (although Dewey certainly has some excellent ideas!)

[https://books.google.com/books?id=Kpccr2\\_bXIa0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=my+pedagogic+creed&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjktuXJgajJAhWCwiYKHXkiDpAQ6AEIMDAA#v=onepage&q=my%20pedagogic%20creed&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=Kpccr2_bXIa0C&printsec=frontcover&dq=my+pedagogic+creed&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjktuXJgajJAhWCwiYKHXkiDpAQ6AEIMDAA#v=onepage&q=my%20pedagogic%20creed&f=false)

As you'll see, Dewey outlines a series of beliefs and then explicates how he came to hold that belief, its underlying assumptions and observations. For this project, I ask that you compose at least five "I believe" statements that identify your own beliefs about teaching and writing, followed by the kind of brief explication Dewey provides.

I would anticipate that this project would result in a document of roughly two pages, double spaced. No need for research—this is a statement that reflects where you are now, and it is about your values. We will share these beliefs on the discussion board, but we will not judge one another. Instead, we'll all carefully examine our own beliefs in light of the readings for this course, and, at the end of the term, return to this document to see what has changed and what hasn't in light of those readings.

This project will be due at the end of Week 1. Please submit to me via email. You're also asked to post some preliminary statements of belief to our week one discussion board.