

**NICKOLE BROWN**  
**STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY:**

I've begun many introductory and graduate workshops by having students take out their notebooks and draw a tree. Without fail, the vast majority sketch a stick for a trunk and a puffy cloud for leaves, a simple lollipop figure that looks nothing like the creaking, nerve-ending giants swaying outside most classroom windows. We discuss how they are not drawing a tree but an *icon of a tree*, and covering some basic linguistic terms, I explain how the *signifier* can trump what's *signified*. This is why, I explain, most early attempts at writing fails: because beginning writers travel those easy, hard-wired paths in the brain geared towards survival, which are inundated with years of advertisements, televised plots, and habitual speech—packaged things that make us feel safe. Thus I begin not by teaching writing but *awareness*, because without it, it's impossible, as Anne Sexton said, to “put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard.”

These lessons in awareness begin with a term used to describe defamiliarization, *ostranenie*—the first word I write on the board. I teach them to say it, allowing them to whisper the awkward Slavic syllables and then cajoling them to say it loud and clear, with all of the strength it demands. I then give each of them an apple—perhaps the most commonplace and cliché-ridden of fruits—and encourage them to look at it as if they've never once seen an apple before, as if they hold in their hands a rare and mysterious gift. We then spend hours (yes, hours), examining the fruit with all of our senses.

Why start with defamiliarization? My students, no matter how disenfranchised or privileged, ranging from first-generation, working-class individuals from the rural South to students who've had every academic and social advantage, all have the one tool they need to experience the world—a body. As Eudora Welty said, “Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world. Then artists come along and discover it the same way, all over again.” It's my job to wake students to their selves, to make them remember their bodies and write from all their senses. It is a re-cognition of the senses that is required to dissolve apathy, the great enemy of effective writing.

Later, after taking them through many generative exercises and nurturing them enough so that they begin to trust their own voices, I move students towards the process of revision. It's then I challenge them to polish their original creations. I remind students about the balance between the necessary forces of both the *creative* and *pragmatic mind*, how a successful work is often born out of *play* but raised with *intent*. This word—*intent*—is key to every workshop I've facilitated. I never pretend to have control over a class or the work produced, and I continually encourage students to have *ownership*, owning both their writing and reading. *What is the writer's intent?* is a question that can be answered without taking ownership over another's work, and I ask it often of my students. In offering feedback, I constantly remind them (and myself) that it's our responsibility to gauge the writer's intent and to see what can be done to move that writer closer to their own intentions, not mine or anyone else's.

I've been teaching since 2008, and in truth, I've learned how to be a teacher from my students. I *mean* this work, and yes, I dare say I'm *meant for* this work and am hard-headed enough to keep at it. As my grandmother, the best teacher I ever had, taught me, "Nothing worth having is easy." I'm far from perfect, but I work hard, sometimes failing. And when this does happen, I keep Beckett in mind, trying again, failing again, failing better each time. This is important because you have to be willing to take risks in the classroom, to be vulnerable in front of your students and let them see your flaws so that they then can give themselves permission to risk, to sometimes fail, and hopefully to eventually succeed.

I should also give credit where it's due: my approach to teaching is a motley amalgamation of mentors I've had in my life. Years ago, I met Leon Driskell, a stately old professor who intimidated us all at the University of Louisville but, on many occasions, opened his office to our neurotic ramblings to offer strong coffee and solid advice, showing me that *good professors demand hard work front-and-center; they're not necessarily your friend, but to the side provide patient understanding and support*. From fiction writer Ellen Lesser, one of my mentors at Vermont College, I learned *how rigorous feedback is essential and that elements of craft can't be taught by jabbering on about their virtues but by rolling up your sleeves to carefully diagram sentences and examine each line word by word*. And from poet Laure-Anne Bosselaar, whom I met during a writing conference at Sarah Lawrence, I know that *most students will listen to what you have to say once they trust you, once they realize you have a genuine love for them*. Finally, the late James Baker Hall, at one time my author at Sarabande who became one of the great teachers in my life—he taught me *the importance of teaching things that can't be understood*. Demanding what a poem means, after all, is like nailing jelly to the wall; it exists for the purpose of the inexplicable, or as James put it once, "It is housed in the night-time mind, giving the writer license to discontinuous thought."

It was teachers who saved me, first from the knot of my own childhood and its lack of education—a literary equivalent of grease and plastic—and later from myself, flat-lined as I was with disbelief in the seemingly untouchable world of books. Jerry Marlett, a substitute teacher who had the misfortune of landing at my rough-neck high school at its pinnacle of aerosol-flamethrowers and soda-can bongos, *I know to have faith in any student, no matter how unprepared they might be for my classroom*. Mr. Marlette made me mixed tapes of Pat Metheny and Woody Guthrie and recordings of Marianne Moore. I still remember the rattling of my car when I listened to "What Are Years?" I rolled my eyes at the stodgy crackle of the first two stanzas, but then heard that bird in the last stanza, the one trapped in its cage, mightily singing, "satisfaction is a lowly / thing, how pure a thing is joy."

This is precisely what I want to give to students: something perhaps they didn't even know existed in this world. I want them to emerge from my workshops with a hunger for a life lived with full awareness, fighting for a chance at that joy.