Teaching Description (Comp.)

Dear members of the Search Committee,

It is my pleasure to submit this letter of application for the position of \_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. For over half a decade, I was a Graduate Teaching Fellow in the English Department at Queens College, fortunate enough to teach a number of different classes, from basic composition to writing-intensive surveys of literature and literary theory to senior-level seminars of my own design. And, like so many of my colleagues, I’ve had the chance to teach composition more than any other course, compiling a “best practices” of sorts concerning assignments, readings and approaches.

My particular history, however, regarding the teaching of composition distinguishes me in a way that I think would be particularly beneficial to the student body of ­­­­­­­\_\_\_\_\_. In 2006, I was selected to become part of a pilot program at Queens College designed to teach academic writing entirely in a Digital Humanities mode. While all the traditional essay forms remained (my students produced analyses, summaries, comparisons, abstracts, personal pieces and research papers), the entirety of the work aside from in-class writing was “turned in” online, and the inclusion of digital objects (images, music, short films, etc.) became part of the assignments. It seemed that many students arrived as freshmen with a firm boundary already erected between “composition” (something they grudgingly did only when asked to by a teacher) and the innumerable instances of writing they produced on their own in a multitude of digital formats, such a text messaging, emails, blog posts, social-networking sites, online discussion groups, fan fiction and the like.

Obviously, the ethos behind these special sections of “cyber-comp” was not in the service of producing research papers bearing all the dreaded grammatical hallmarks of a text message, but, rather, to demystify and define the process of “communication through writing” as an action our students commit countless times a day. Once the connection was made that composition is, quite simply, any act of composing, it became much easier to harness their enthusiasm for writing in the service of producing academic forms more recognizable to an English department. My ESL and ELL students seemed to benefit most of all, expressing themselves first through the more familiar languages of image, music and film, and then translating the subsequent confidence of these successes into prose. The finished pieces they created ranged from the witty (one student had the distinctive opening bars of Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir” begin to play when I clicked on his blog post about the conflict in his birthplace) to the profound (in an argumentative piece about settlement agreements, another student included video clips of interviews she conducted herself with both Israeli Jews and Palestinians while on a family trip to Jerusalem during spring break).

I speak at such length about the Digital Humanities because it was through this experience that my teaching philosophy was formed. The response from students was immediate: A near-100% homework completion rate, higher attendance, an obvious increase in enthusiasm and engagement during discussions—all provided at no added cost to the school through various free online platforms. While this work is exciting on its own merits, it also seems to be the direction that many English departments are moving their programs, emphasizing a broader form of compositional and digital proficiency that I imagine will only become more *de rigueur* as we move further into the new century. The program I helped design at Queens continues to expand in both pedagogical and technological sophistication, but perhaps the greatest symptom of its success is its dissolution as a separate entity: A number of techniques pioneered and honed in my sections have grown so popular among instructors that they’re now simply part of the expectations for all sections of college writing.

Because of this work, I was invited by the Composition Policy Committee to participate in a new project that aimed to integrate college writing more fully into the general-education curriculum. The idea was to pair a number of sections of composition with courses in other departments, providing a thematic link between the two, and collapsing yet another boundary that relegates writing to something students do “only in comp.” Based on the model used in the Princeton Writing Program, the project intends to initiate a conversation about writing that extends beyond disciplinary lines, helping students develop expertise on particular topics in a manner more akin to professional writers and academics while establishing a shared set of goals and terms that can be exported to the rest of their classes. The early results of this initiative are encouraging—not least due to the fact that we were able to successfully adapt a model common in the Ivy League to the financial restraints of a public university.

My other academic research involves a rhetorical analysis of the effects of the Russian Revolution on American imperial culture, most specifically as it pertains to immigration and radicalism. Focusing on a number of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors as well as reportage, film and even the language of legislative acts, I am on schedule to defend my dissertation in August of 2012, and then turn this investigation into a broader work in the mode of cultural studies. As well, I have both an undergraduate and Master’s degree in creative writing, with a practicable amount of experience in the teaching of craft. And while it’s perhaps both trite and expected to say how deeply I believe in public education, I assure you that my commitment to teaching at \_\_\_\_\_ bears no trace of lip service. As a product of New York public schools—and as a student in the CUNY system since 2001—I know from both sides of the big desk the vast potential of public education, and take great pride in my students’ ethnic, racial and religious diversity. Indeed, I often design assignments around such productive differences in cyber-comp.

Please find attached my curriculum vitae and let me know if I may provide any additional materials in support of my application, such as observation reports and letters of recommendation. I hope to have the opportunity to meet with you during the interview process. Your time and consideration are deeply appreciated, and I look forward to your response.