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Philosophy of Teaching

While an English class focused on composition is a means for transmitting skills and knowledge for future academic writing in various courses, it should also facilitate skills that help students thrive in the real world. Composition courses, more than any type of course, have the potential to help students become better employees and better citizens in general, even before they graduate from college with a degree. As a composition instructor, I have an opportunity to encourage students to communicate more effectively, not only in writing, but in speech and by non-verbal means, as well. My goal is to cultivate critical thinking and rhetorical self-awareness, as well as writing skills, which will aid my pupils in practical ways in many facets of life, and will transfer far beyond academic discourse. I strive to make my classroom a place where students meet with other students and their instructor as co-thinkers and “real” writers—the only true experts on their own thoughts. This is the foundation for my philosophy of teaching.

In order to internalize a level of rhetorical competence and critical thinking through writing, students need to be able to write according to their best understanding of reader expectations without fear of penalty. I want my students to think of themselves not just as composition students writing for a grade, but as people whose thinking process yields intellectual fruit that is worth sharing, whether their writing is perfect or not. With this in mind, I put great emphasis on the process of writing, not just the finished product. In my class, a great deal of weight is placed on participation. Students are allowed to write rough drafts, and then get feedback from peers and myself about positive aspects of their writing and issues that need work. Thus, they learn from their achievements and errors when the stakes are low. As the class works on pre-writing and drafting, we discuss rhetorical strategies with references to Aristotelian theory and audience awareness, and students learn to recognize rhetorical weaknesses as part of the composing process. Thesis statement activities, outlines, and rough drafts are given full credit, as long as they meet a minimum content requirement that shows the student is at least trying to meet the goals outlined in the assignment description. This allows students to take risks and build confidence before they have to hand in a final paper for grading. When grading final papers, I consider evidence of each student’s efforts to improve from feedback on drafts and previous essays as much as I consider the quality of the essay compared to standard expectations.

Although sentence level issues receive some attention when I review writing at different stages, demonstration of critical thinking and persuasive skills far outweighs mechanical aptitude. I agree with David Bartholomae’s statement from his famous article, “Inventing the University:” “...one of the problems with curricula designed to aid basic writers is that they too often begin with the assumption that the key distinguishing feature of a basic writer is the presence of sentence level error” (1986, *Journal of Basic Writing*). Like Bartholomae, I believe too much emphasis is often put on “correct” writing. The freedom to make mistakes and enter an academic

conversation as they best know how is essential to students' development as writers and thinkers. Knowing how to write correctly in a mechanical sense might help a student's ethos, which is important, but not nearly as important as a structured argument with a strong sense of audience. I let my students know from the outset that I do not expect perfect writing, but I expect to see genuine attempts to develop thought and improve rhetorical effectiveness through the stages of writing. I believe that the best approach is to assess student writing "...holistically—on the student's active intellectual engagement with each stage of the writing process and on the student's responses to the formative feedback received along the way" as Greg Barnhisel, Evan Stoddard, and Jennifer Gorman described in their article "Incorporating Process-Based Writing Pedagogy into First-Year Learning Communities: Strategies and Outcomes" (2012, *The Journal of General Education*). To grade a student on finished product alone means to ignore an often painstaking process through which students have labored to craft a piece of writing that resembles whatever genre of writing their instructor is asking them to produce. I believe the labor itself deserves a reward, with the hope that the reward will encourage future efforts.

My focus on individual development is based, to a large extent, on my writing center experience. The frequent peer workshops and discussions with each student, especially in the early stages of the writing process, is a direct result of the nurturing and inclusive attitude I developed as a graduate assistant writing tutor and assistant director at a university writing center. Because I started in a writing center, not as a classroom teacher, my first two years' experience in writing instruction revolved around individual instruction and collaborating with writers without judging the quality of their writing through grading. When I began to teach in a classroom environment, the outstanding improvement I saw in many writing center clients led me to adopt collaboration as a key part of my class structure, not only in workshops, but also through in-class activities and collaborative research assignments.

The process approach and collaborative learning environment I strive to produce in my classroom allows students to learn not only from me, but from other students. It also allows for an experience that is closer to the real world, where efforts at communication often get immediate feedback, unlike an essay that receives only the delayed and esoteric feedback that comes with a letter grade and instructor comments. This ongoing feedback allows budding writers to improve without the constant fear of a failing grade, become more confident, and form positive habits that they carry into their future academic careers and beyond. I believe that this constant encouragement and collaboration yields writers who are more relaxed, and for whom academic writing becomes a straightforward procedure. I have made it my mission as an instructor to help individual students reach their potential by helping them to internalize not only a process of writing, but a sense of their own identities as writers.