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Teaching Philosophy

In my own studies, the professors who inspired and affected me most were those who gave greatly to their students – knowledge, resources, time. Now that I am a teacher myself, I view teaching as more of a symbiotic relationship: I endeavor to give much to my students, but I receive much from them as well – fresh perspectives, energy, joy, intellectual stimulation. In a successful writing class, I believe everyone (teacher included!) learns from one another. I strive to foster a stimulating and collaborative learning environment in my classroom, where students feel comfortable expressing themselves freely, taking intellectual and creative risks, and engaging in open-minded class discussion. I believe a positive classroom environment best facilitates learning, no matter what discipline or academic background students come from or outside interests they bring to the classroom.

In this vein, my greatest goal as a teacher is to not only improve my students' writing and critical-thinking skills, but also to increase their confidence in their ability to communicate and analyze information, both in the academic realm and in their future professional lives. I begin each class with a five minute "free-write" to foster ideas and get students comfortable with writing. Students need not share these exercises aloud; the only rule is everyone must write the entire time. Prompts vary from creative writing exercises to questions relating to the assignment students are working on at the time, such as: "Reflect on what you learned when conducting your first interview" when they are writing a profile of a professor in their discipline. My students teach me about their various areas of study; they remind me to continually question the world around me and to nurture my intellectual curiosity; they inspire me with their willingness to jump into something new and with their fearless honesty and self-insight.

I believe much of the teaching of writing is often an "unteaching": helping students recognize and "unlearn" self-imposed restrictions, negativity, and insecurities. Many students come into my class "hating" to write or scarred from previous English classes by a long list of "writing rules": *never begin a sentence with "because"; never use the word "I" in a paper; never this, never that.* In my class, we discuss writing as a series of choices; no choice is "off limits" to the writer, but some strategies are more effective than others when trying to get one's point across in a certain manner or to a certain audience. Students practice writing to different audiences and in different genres. For example, we discuss how using the word "I" in a personal essay has the effect of drawing the reader closer, while using it in a research paper can undermine the writer's authority or make the research presented seem slanted or one-sided.

I also present writing as a process, with students turning in multiple drafts of every assignment. We focus on various levels of revision in each draft, from the clarity of ideas presented to the organization of information to sentence structure and word choice. My students also sharpen their own sensibilities as writers by responding to each other's work, both in class and as homework. When giving peer feedback, students are challenged to answer *why* something is working or perhaps not working so well, and what strategies the writer could use in revision. Many students have cited peer response as one of the most useful aspects of my class, helping them look at their own papers with a honed editorial eye. I also ask students to consider "What is *this particular writer* attempting to do in this piece?" rather than "If *I* were writing this piece, I would do *this* instead." This shows respect for each other as writers with individual styles and perspectives.

Students come into my class with a variety of majors and interests. I try to impress upon them that no matter what field they ultimately go into, being able to write and communicate well is imperative to their success. My curriculum reinforces this philosophy, with assignments that not only build upon each other pedagogically but also relate to each student's own field of study and needs. For example, in the first week of class we discuss formal versus informal writing and students write a professional email as an assignment. All of my students are extremely familiar with email and use it every day, but have never approached it as a rhetorical genre; in this way, I denaturalize email and help students look at their email habits with a fresh perspective. As a class, we work to "unlearn" habits such as slang speech or improper grammar when writing an email to a more formal audience. Throughout the semester my students practice their professional writing skills, such as when contacting an upper-division professor in their major to request to sit in on a class to write an ethnographical report. Furthermore, I encourage my students to use this ethnographical report as a springboard to get to know a professor who could become a mentor to them, and some have even landed summer internships because of this assignment.

Ray Bradbury said of the reading and writing process: "We are cups ... constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out." I believe the best writing teachers help students discover how to fill themselves up and tip themselves over.