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Philosophy of Teaching

When I walk into a classroom, this is what I believe: mutual collaborative learning is the foundation of teaching. That is, I believe knowledge is made by the classroom community and all members of that community have an impact on and are impacted by that knowledge-making. Therefore, my classroom becomes a collaboration that includes a great deal of peer group work, student presentations and discussions. I want every student's voice to be heard, every diverse viewpoint. A person passing by my classroom once commented that it was "quite noisy in there." My reply was, "That's learning you hear." Yes, I do have to present information at times in a mini-lecture format. However, the students take over from there. They bring to the table the insights they've made from their readings, from their observations, from the writing they've been assigned for that day. They make their presentations, hold their discussions, and give their input to each other—not just to me. And learning happens.

For example, in my Technical Writing class (ENG 351), after I introduce concepts regarding the integration of visuals with text, in groups the students must design a visual to accompany pieces of text for a "real life" report. Upon its completion, each group makes a presentation to the rest of the class, who then must discuss the designs in terms of the concepts I had introduced. Thus, the students are teaching themselves and each other the practical side of the theory. I believe in these methods because I have seen their impact on student learning. When my students talk to one another, they are teaching one another, as well as themselves. The student evaluations also reinforce my belief. For example, students have commented on the tech writing class:

- I really enjoyed this class. We had a variety of activities and projects that helped us learn and grasp the subject material. (Spring '03)
- I liked the group work that we did after the discussion of the particular topics for that day. After hearing about each new topic, and then going through and working on it with a group really cemented the knowledge in my head. Peer revision was helpful as well...I enjoyed the fresh perspectives that I got. (Fall '00)
- The course itself was extremely challenging, but I have learned more in one semester than all other semesters (no offense to my other teachers.) I had a great time. (Spring '01)
- I expected a lot of hard work, but it didn't seem too bad until the end of the semester. I enjoyed it and learned a lot from it. I'm definitely glad that I took this class and feel that I will be much more prepared when I go out into the job market. The professor was excellent. (Spring '99)
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These evaluations are further confirmed by the fact that my students consistently win awards for their projects from the tech writing class. This year alone, one of my

students won first prize in the Society for Technical Communication's scholarship competition.

As equally important to student learning, I learn as much as my students (maybe more at times). For instance, each time I teach Drama Lit (ENG 244), a student will point out a new aspect of a play that I had not thought about before. Or a group of students will present their own interpretation of a play scene and the whole class is introduced to a new insight into the characters. This keeps the course new and lively in my own eyes, as well as the students'. Further, I do not consider myself the ultimate authority in any class; I tell students when I don't know something and turn it into a teaching moment with all of us racing to find the answer. I try to make my students feel as comfortable as possible with me and with each other. I am always heartened when a student, who was quite reticent at the beginning of the semester, feels comfortable enough to join the discussion, or even disagree with something that another student (or even I) has said. To further this cause, it is imperative for me to see where the students are located in certain texts we use and what kinds of discourse have influenced them in their learning journey. In two of my courses (Drama Lit and Playwriting), I actually make my students write a hermeneutical discussion of their own lives (where they've come from, what has influenced them to be who they are), in order for them to understand why they are who they are and why they interpret things the way they do. This also gives me a better insight into where to begin the learning process.

In the case of student writing, I teach the process giving the students many prose models in order to guide the students through imitation. For example, in College Writing I and II (ENG 101-102), as a class we read sample essays then together take them apart, analyzing what the characteristics are of a successful essay of that type and what can impede that success. I also require multiple revisions of student writing; they must revise their drafts after conferencing with me and then again after peer revision, where they receive "audience" feedback from other students. I conference with students at least twice during a semester (for all my classes—not just writing courses). In writing courses, I conference at least three times a semester, more often four. However, again, I am not the ultimate authority over their writing; they are. I am only a facilitator who guides them toward the knowledge they need to become responsible for their own work. The students must be the authority themselves for whatever they turn in; I will give them whatever aid they need, but after all, it is their writing.

Which leads me to my next point: students should be responsible for their own learning. As I've hinted above, I cannot do the learning for them. However, I want to encourage them, to the best of my ability, by giving them the tools to become life-long learners and discerners. An illustration: in the new course I designed and taught last fall, ENG 103—Writing in the Disciplines, the first essay of the semester required the students to make scientific observations, followed by a literature review to back up the observations, then their conclusions. With this assignment alone, they learned to observe closely, perform library research to learn more about a topic, and finally to make educated discernments. These skills were carried over into the other three essays (Social Science, Humanities and Reflection/ Process) that they had to write that semester. And I believe that these skills will translate to not only the rest of their college careers, but also

into their lives. Several students at the end of the semester commented in their reflection essays that they had actually used these skills in other courses. One student wrote: [I]n my Social Work class, one essay required me to analyze my life and the effectiveness of my social network. I was able to pick out subjective observations, and edit/revise to make objective observations. I had to step back and look at my life through the eyes of someone else to realize when my own hermeneutic and feelings were influencing the way I saw some relationships.

I was elated to see that the class had responded so well to the course assignments and to their own responsibility for learning. But more than that, I was ecstatic when I was given compliments by professors in other disciplines saying how grand the new course is and that they had seen the improvement in the students' writing.

As a teacher, I try to read books and articles that'll strengthen my teaching and I regularly attend conferences in my fields of interest. I continually try new teaching methods, looking for those that work best and then refining others. However, I also do not teach the same class the same way each time because the needs and/or issues of the students change. For instance, one class of students may be particularly advanced in their argument skills; therefore, we cover less of the basics and I make the assignments more challenging. Or, with our country's involvement in Iraq, last Spring students in my Rhetoric class often used the issue of the ethics of war as the topic for essays.

Teaching is not just a career for me; it is a passion. It took me a long time to discover what I wanted to be when I grew up—I was 35—but it was well worth the wait. And while I do enjoy my own writing, the professional development, the academic camaraderie, even to some extent (dare I say) the committee work, I always remember why I'm here: to help others learn.