

A Philosophy of Teaching Writing - Part I An Ongoing Dilemma

For me, teaching writing is a privilege. My students are often surprised when I tell them this and ask me why. My answer is simple: It allows me to fulfill an important goal in my life. That goal is to help students realize the power of communication, to share with them the ways in which good communication skills can help them attain many of their goals, and to help them see the ways in which poor communication skills might jeopardize those goals.

At the same time, I am constantly confronted with a dilemma about teaching writing: No matter how long I teach (it's been over 20 years), teaching writing does not and should not get easier. The amount of time one must spend outside the classroom to respond to or grade papers is enormous, and if one is to teach it well, the daily plans from semester to semester and class to class must continually change. This is true for a number of reasons. A writing course must take students beyond a textbook and textbook definitions of good writing. Concepts are only useful to students in abstract ways, so students need repeated opportunities to practice and apply any concepts to their own papers, their own research, and their own style.

Thus, each class period becomes a challenge. Daily, I strive to provide my students with a balance. We discuss the process of revision, but I must also provide time for them to practice revising ideas and articulating them more clearly. We discuss grammatical and stylistic concepts and examples, but I must also provide time for them to recognize and apply those concepts to their own papers. Helping them construct their portfolios is also a challenge. While most students' process is to write a paper, turn it in and be done with it, I must provide them with the incentive to write a paper, revise it, submit it and then revise it again. I must also help them see the value of their portfolios as "works in progress," as reflections of the ways in which their writing is changing, growing and taking shape.

An additional challenge is to create a classroom environment in which students feel it is "safe" to articulate an idea poorly and equally "safe" to accept suggestions, corrections, praise and criticism. In this cooperative rather than competitive environment, I believe it is more important for students to learn, for example, to identify their own faulty parallelisms, not simply correct a textbook example; they must learn to articulate their own arguments, not simply read or critique another's. My goal is to guide and mentor students into thinking more critically and writing more succinctly. More importantly, my goal is to help students identify their own writing processes so that they leave my class confident, not just of a particular body of knowledge, but that they have developed a process of thinking and writing they can apply to any learning situation.

Always questioning the extent to which I have met these goals but always confident that my students are headed in the right direction, I sit in my office behind a continuous stack of papers, slowly sipping my double cappuccino and constantly repositioning my reading glasses—eager to hear the voices of my budding scientists.

A Philosophy of Teaching Writing - Part II The Practical Guidelines

The basic principles from which I teach revolve around the theories and published research about the teaching of writing developed throughout the past 25 years. As a writing instructor, I work from four principles; these principles direct what I teach, how I teach, how I interact with students and what I require of students. The following describes those principles and how each informs my teaching.

Writers need guides and mentors, not just critics and judges.

The basis of my teaching is to act primarily as a mentor. I help students focus on developing their

writing as well as understand their own process of writing so that they can apply their skills in a variety of situations. To facilitate this development, I constantly communicate with and intervene in the students' efforts to write. My role is not merely to judge or critique their writing; my role is to guide and mentor them as they work their way through difficult concepts. I discuss drafts with students one-on-one and in groups, respond to drafts and revisions without assigning grades, point out strengths and weaknesses, and motivate them to revise. The research is quite clear that the majority of learning takes place not in the "drafting and grade" model but in the "revising and feedback" model of teaching writing.

Writing is a process that requires writers to develop a cognitive awareness of the writing choices available to them.

In order for writers to make choices about their content and style, they need to be reminded and further informed about those choices open to them. Thus, I teach specific aspects of writing: style, mechanics, organizational patterns, analysis, logical thinking, and audience awareness, as well as how researched information and their own claims about that research can most effectively and efficiently help them communicate to a listening audience. Numerous research studies confirm that when rules and skills are taught in isolation, the majority of writers cannot apply individual rules to their own writing. However, when style, mechanics and grammar are taught as concepts and rhetorical devices that writers must apply directly to their own manuscripts, writers improve. Also, the ability to understand and apply concepts is a developmental process, a process which is recursive, not linear. Thus, my teaching involves reviewing concepts and showing students how to apply those concepts in different situations and more exacting ways, and how to employ different strategies and techniques based on particular audiences' needs.

Writing is a process that requires writers to develop their ability to think critically.

Teaching writing involves teaching students how to use writing to explore and examine their own and others' claims and how to discuss the implications of those claims. But this type of critical thinking is a developmental process, an extremely complex process. So, although I strive to reach particular outcomes, my emphasis is to teach students how to develop their critical thinking abilities. Thus, I meet them at their particular levels and teach them specific skills step-by-step. For example, if they do not know how to separate factual information from their opinions about those facts, they need writing assignments that require them to practice articulating this difference. If they do not know how to access sources to which they can react, I show them how to find and incorporate sources into their papers. And, if they do not know how to articulate a logical argument or how to recognize a logical fallacy, I illustrate how to develop their arguments more maturely.

Teaching writing necessitates continued exploration of research and writing processes.

As in any field, new studies provide professionals a broader understanding of theories and a better array of techniques for implementing those theories. Thus, I continue to allow the published research to inform my own process of writing, my understanding of how students learn and develop as writers, and my use of new techniques for teaching writing. In addition, I continue to examine my own writing processes and remain cognizant of the numerous concepts and skills needed to produce well-written documents. Thus, I write, share my writing with my students and submit publications to share my ideas and techniques for teaching with my colleagues.