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## Working with Student Writing in the Classroom

*N.B.: The following are statements of my assumptions, my practice as a teacher, and conclusions I have drawn from many classroom observations. For clarity and economy, I phrase them as if they were The Truth. I assume that the reader will verify or disprove these assertions for herself or himself.*

*If some of what follows seems elementary and obvious, don't assume condescension on my part; assume that we agree.*

When you teach something, you talk about that something in class.

Therefore: When you're teaching students to write, you go to class and talk about your students' writing. **In a writing course, discussion of student writing should be the #1 priority for use of class time.**

**During these discussions, every student should have in hand a copy of the writing being discussed.** Without such a copy in the student's hand, it is impossible to have a detailed, substantive discussion about the exact words that are on the page. Writing happens at the sentence level – not the general overall impression level. To discuss a paper, you need the whole text available for reference.

However, when you want to focus on one specific issue of writing technique, it's easier to do so by looking at isolated passages; therefore, it's sometimes useful to copy and discuss paragraphs by themselves (e.g., opening or closing ones), or sentences which exemplify some issue about writing.

I frequently make handouts I call "items for scrutiny," consisting of sentences or passages copied from student papers that will provide a basis for discussing a writing issue I regard as important to the class as a whole.

A writing course requires a hefty photocopying budget. This is not a luxury, it's a necessity.

### Sharing Writing/Reading Aloud

At the beginning of a course, I establish a ground rule that all student writing may be shared with the class unless I make an explicit exception. If a student wants to turn in a piece of writing that is not to be shared with the class, she needs to talk to me about that first. Students do not have a problem living with this ground rule, and they rarely ask that a piece of their work be considered "not for publication." In many classes it never happens.

Students don't learn much from being told how to write in a general way; they learn from criticizing specific pieces of writing. It has been my experience that discussions of hypothetical papers, even of papers the students are just about to write, are frustrating, perfunctory, and poorly focused in comparison to discussions of actual written words.

There is no substitute for hearing a piece read aloud while simultaneously reading the words on paper. This combination of experiences focuses the attention better than either one by itself (unless the reading-aloud is ineptly done). I have every paper read by its author unless I know that the writer finds it a form of torture, or I know she will murder the piece in the reading. Some people read aloud so poorly that they shouldn't be allowed to spoil the effect of their own work.

Comment on the way people read out loud. Thank them for doing so.

### What Follows the Reading Aloud

For a basic sense of what might go on in a discussion of a piece of writing, see "Ways to Critique Writing," available at:  
<http://my.simmons.edu/services/asc/wac/teachingwriting/>

If students (other than the author) haven't previously read a paper that is read aloud for discussion in class, keep this fact in mind. You may have read the piece three times, written comments all over it, devoted time to deciding what issues to address in it – but the students haven't. Give them a chance to think about it; *expect* them to think about it. Thinking is what you want them to do. If students sit for two or three minutes going over a paper that has just been read, it will help to produce a useful and coherent discussion. This may feel like an interminable gap in the class to you, but remember that **since the students are actively working during this time, it's part of a continuity to them.** What you should do, while the students are mulling over a piece, is reassure the author (who will be sitting there feeling uncomfortable) that it's okay for them to take their time thinking about it.

When you pass out copies of a student paper to work on in class, have an idea of what you want to point at in that paper and why. Also be open to the possibility that the students will have another and better idea – better because more relevant to their needs.

On asking questions, extensive experience of observing classroom teaching has shown me that one common, recurring problem in leading class discussions is this: the teacher thinks that a question is clearly on the table, and the students don't know what the question is. The teacher, believing that the question has been clearly asked, construes the students' unresponsiveness as laziness, resistance, failure to do the reading, etc. The students are aware that some intellectual action is expected of them, but they haven't been given a place to begin. This feels unfair. Everybody gets frustrated. My advice, therefore, is: when the class seems unresponsive, check to see if they understand what the question is. Or just skip the checking and rephrase it.

Concerning silences in general: wait as long as you can bear to, then wait some more. Don't wait perversely, in a tug-of-war over who'll speak first, but *when there has been sufficient guidance to point toward a train of thought, and sufficient material presented for the mind to work on*, assume that silence is required because thoughts are forming.

Don't talk just to fill up space. Rely on the students to hold up their end of the work. If they come to understand that you won't place this responsibility on them, that you will stop any gaps that occur, then they may get lazy and simply sit around letting you answer your own questions.

Students should not sit in rows; looking at the back of someone else's head is not conducive to discussion.

Students never seem to hear anything told to them once they have started putting on coats and packing up books, so one should not get into the position of having to convey something crucial – like the assignment – at that time.

In a writing class, five to ten minutes of lecturing is enough to make most students' eyes glaze over.

This is not to say that one should never lecture at all. It is quicker and more efficient simply to say one's piece than to ask questions in a transparent attempt not to lecture. In such a situation, the students' impatience with this artificial interchange may make them unwilling to respond, which slows the process down still further. Just tell 'em what you have to say, and then ask real questions.

Filling the air with words is not necessarily education, whether the words come from teacher or students.

But let me contradict myself at once: though there may be no point in having a discussion just so you can say you had one, it is nevertheless important to get students to talk to each other. I feel that there are useful days in the classroom where I could not at every minute answer the question, "Exactly how is this conversation leading them to an eventual piece of writing?" The key word is "conversation." Perhaps conversation can only begin if one can relax for a minute about ultimate goals.

Perhaps words that fill the air uselessly do so because no listening occurs as a counterpoint to the talking. Or because the teacher gives a discussion as one might give a lecture.

In my experience, it can be worthwhile to let students engage in chit-chat, to socialize about things not related to the course, in order to get them comfortable with talking to each other. I have taught freshman classes where I felt as though I had to hold down a constant pressure of chit-chat and gossip in order to get and keep the floor for working on writing – but my sense was that this energy in the room was good and could be channeled toward learning.

Nothing is more frustrating than a class where the students are afraid to say anything in front of each other – and it can happen. I don't know how to undo that feeling of mutual intimidation when it sets in full force. One of my goals is to avoid letting that start to happen, at all costs.

Simply asking for opinions seldom brings about a useful insight or a discussion possessing some direction, not because the students don't have insights (they do), but because a roomful of people left to themselves usually don't focus.

Nonetheless, it is ever possible that people will get interested in something that was said, carry it out of the room with them, and achieve their own focus. And the teacher won't know it until later on.

Generally speaking, only the teacher has the authority to sum up a discussion and give it a sense of closure. In my experience, it is not always possible to do this, but it is worth doing when I can.

It's harder than one thinks to convey an assignment. Use more than one medium to do so: explain the assignment out loud, pass out a written description of it for reference, pass out an example of actual student work on such an assignment. Set aside time in class for students to read your handout describing the assignment and ask you questions about it. Get them to paraphrase it for you. Try to achieve shared understanding of the assignment before everyone leaves the room.

"Any other comments?" often clearly means "This discussion is as good as over." "Any comments?" can sound like it means "Or shall we just ignore this and go on to the next paper?"

Students love simple elegant solutions to writing problems. I know they don't come along every day, but when you find one that you can show them, don't pass up the opportunity.

When a student says "I'm not sure what you mean" -- or words to that effect -- the teacher is in luck.

Suspenders and belt: have more things planned for class than you can get through in the time allotted. Be ready to abandon an activity that you're sure is not working.

Also be ready to change from one sort of activity to another for the sake of pacing. When working on massive texts starts to bog down, have quickly soluble problems, very short & specific items for scrutiny, etc., ready to interject.

As in dance, the medium pace is often deadly. Work fast at times; at other times be willing to cling with tenacity to a very specific point until it is clarified.

Don't assume that any one teaching strategy is always the best just because it is sometimes the best.

### **Providing models for writing:**

Save old papers, not just the good ones, for use as **models** of what to do and what not to do. In general, much can be conveyed by a model that cannot be conveyed by a generalized description. "Oh, so *that's* what you mean."

Excellent student work is the most helpful model for all but the very strongest student writers. Emulating writing by professionals (including the teacher) strikes most students as completely out of the question. They

should read professional writing, of course; but they will not actually believe themselves capable of doing what the pros do. When they see the excellent work of their peers, they're more likely to think, "By God, if she can do that, I can at least try."

### **Distributing airtime/whose work gets discussed:**

Start the semester by making sure that everyone has been heard to read at least a sentence of her work out loud to the group, as soon as possible.

Keep a log of whose paper was read in class when; use it to distribute airtime more or less equally and to prevent yourself from always calling on the best writers. Students remember in remarkable detail the papers discussed in class; they will detect an imbalance in favor of a certain student, sometimes before you do.

The question then is: Which pieces get copied for class, and when?

Most desirable of all are the excellent papers that can serve as a model for others. At the beginning of a semester I always bring to class copies of papers that are in some way worth emulating; I never start with models of what not to do.

It makes sense, also, to copy and discuss papers that are only pretty good, as opposed to excellent, and that are made less than excellent by an identifiable writing problem many people are having (thus creating an opening to address that writing issue for everyone).

Later in the semester, I would copy and distribute papers by writers who have been left out of group review because their work has been consistently weaker than that of others. A student whose work you never put before the class will feel you have given up on her completely, so even the weak writers must have their turn in the spotlight. That turn comes later in the semester because I am hoping to give them time to improve.

Sometimes, when I am completely stumped by a paper or a student, I put it in front of the class in the hope that the other students will be able to deal with it better than I can. And yes, this sometimes does work. Sometimes students can see their peers' work in ways I simply cannot.

### **Guiding Small Group Work in Class**

There are a number of good reasons to have students work on their writing in small groups during class time:

The activity has a social value; it gets students talking to each other; it creates the opportunity to form relationships. Often those who won't talk in the big group (the whole class) will talk to two or three others, instead of just sitting and watching, suffering from intimidation or shyness. It allows, or compels, a student's responses to writing to be spoken and heard more often than they might be in the whole group.

It is a way of getting the teacher out of the role of ringmaster; it creates several centers in the class instead of just one; it **transfers responsibility to students**.

It allows everyone to leave class having gotten some feedback on their current paper. (No, it probably won't be feedback from you, but students will get feedback immediately instead of having to wait for you to write on their papers.)

It creates variation in the classroom experience, breaks up the routine.

It cultivates a community of writers and readers who learn that they can respect, rely on, and learn from each other.

Sometimes – let's be honest – you have too much work to do, and you can't find time to respond to your students' papers, so you have them respond to each other's.

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There are also a number of **risks** associated with small group work, including:

Students may not take the responsibility it places on them; they may talk about parking problems or TV shows the whole time, until and unless the teacher joins the group.

The quality of the responses offered to the writing may be unacceptable; it may become a situation of the blind leading the blind, or the overly polite avoiding all meaningful statements. If it does become that – and most students seem to have some past experience of small group work in which these things happened – the students may justifiably see it as a waste of their time and tuition.

THEREFORE

it behooves one who would have students do small group work to give them **explicit guidance**, while leaving them significant responsibilities. Not that this is any different from teaching in general.

There must be countless ways of structuring a small-group discussion of writing, but my point here is that one should structure it by **listing specific questions to consider and spelling out specific procedures to follow**.

Small group work generally depends on having students read their work aloud to their group, unless you have organized it in advance so that they bring enough extra copies of their work to class. Obviously this reading aloud can become distracting when several groups are working in a small space, but students usually seem to be able to deal with that.

In the context of Writing Infusion – that is, in content courses within majors – I would suggest the following about small group work: **From time to time ask yourself what writing issues your class is grappling with**

**at the moment, and consider structuring small group discussions to address those issues.**

**Example:** You realize that your students can get a paper started pretty decently, but they are having a terrible time concluding it. So you ask them, when working in small groups, to focus their attention on how the problem of concluding was solved or not solved in a given paper. You provide them with a list of questions, possibly some variation on these:

Is the conclusion intellectually satisfying to you as a reader?

Does it answer the questions the paper raises?

Does it do more than predictably summarize what has been said? If not, what more should it do?

Does it leave you with any intriguing thoughts about the subject?

Does the conclusion try too hard to wrap everything up, and so end up oversimplifying? Is it *too* conclusive?

Does the conclusion leave too many unanswered questions? What are those questions?

Are there excellent ideas in the conclusion that the writer could make use of throughout the paper? [I can't resist including this, because it so often happens that the best ideas in a student's paper occur in the last paragraph. As a grad student of mine once said, "The last seed that falls is the one that sprouts."]

Besides structuring the content, you should **guide the process** of group work: tell the writer what role you want her to play in the discussion (this could range from keeping silent to setting the agenda), tell the responders what their function is – as you would presumably do with the whole class.

**Discussions of writing in the group as a whole serve as a model for small group discussions, both content and process.**

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In my own teaching, I don't have people work in groups of three or four as much as I have them work in pairs. I do this because when people work in pairs, I can count on both of them getting their paper discussed during a class period, and it leaves no room for one of the two to tune out. As a logistical bonus, if students simply trade papers, working in pairs requires no extra copies of the paper to be discussed. For more on this procedure, see "Peer Review of Student Writing," available at: <http://my.simmons.edu/services/asc/wac/teachingwriting/>

### **Just a few more homilies and I'm done:**

Work at doing that which is the opposite of your natural tendency. For instance, because I can be a pushover when students ask for extensions or say they need to miss class, I try to make it unmistakably clear on my syllabus that too many missed classes or late papers can have serious consequences.

I have a tendency to shy away from coming down with The Answer; as a student once said, I am very good at conveying that there's something mighty interesting out there, without quite letting on what it is. Therefore, I try to make myself come down with something definite, or ask the class if I am leaving an issue in limbo. In general I think it's helpful to ask the class to confirm or deny my suspicions when I suspect that I'm off the track.

I have found it consistently useful to talk with students in conference about how the class is going, how the process feels in the classroom. Talking with students one-on-one frequently breaks what I perceive to be a logjam in the class dynamic.

Your own life as the basis of your thoughts is a valid part of class time – just as we ask students to think on the basis of their life experience.

Most specific to the teaching of writing: Be willing to bring in your own experience as a writer & thinker, and your own hard-won conclusions about how the process works. **Your own writing life, whatever it may have been, is the ultimate source of your authority to comment on students' writing.**

### **Useful Resources:**

*Sharing and Responding*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (McGraw-Hill, 2000). Contains a wealth of classroom techniques for structuring peer response to writing. In comparison to this concise and substantial guide, my materials only scratch the surface.

*Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, by John C. Bean (Jossey-Bass, 1996). This book lives up to its title. Copies of part of it were distributed during the faculty development day of October 14, 2003.

For some of my writing-related classroom activities, see "Ways to Critique Writing," "Peer Review of Student Writing," "Believing & Doubting," "Punctuate Me!" and "Proofreading & Copy-Editing." All are available at:

<http://my.simmons.edu/services/asc/wac/teachingwriting/>