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teaching philosophy

As a compositionist, I am often tasked with ensuring that my students learn—practically—to write. Yet I believe that it is my responsibility to help my students become responsible, engaged citizens, too. I design assignments and courses allowing students to explore who they are and what they believe—and to challenge what they think, too, by asking them to work outside of their established comfort zones and collaborate with others. Students not only learn course content but also how to apply it in meaningful ways, increasing the likelihood that they will transfer what they have learned, not only to other courses, but beyond the university as well. The beauty of this approach is that when they apply what they have learned in meaningful ways, I learn from them, too.

An example of this practice—this deliberate exploring, challenging, and collaborating through coursework—is a project I implemented in a first-year writing course when offered the opportunity to teach as part of a learning community. At the institution, a small liberal arts college, all first-year students were required to take two linked courses wherein the instructors would coordinate readings and assignments throughout the semester and assign a final project that would be assessed in both courses. Consistent with the institution's mission, the final project had to have ties to the local community. At the end of the semester, students and instructors alike would present the projects at an event on campus that was open to the public. As the standards for the writing class required a traditional academic research essay, it was often the case that such an essay served as the writing class's contribution to the final project. However, my co-teacher, our students, and I had decided that we would work with a local preschool that exclusively served the refugee population of our community. I felt that asking my students to research the plight of these students and their families after engaging with them for an entire semester would be counterproductive, so I assigned that essay as a midterm. We volunteered at the preschool once a week during class time and wrote reflective journal entries after each experience—yes, I kept a journal, too. I cannot ask something of my students what I will not deliver myself. The journals took whatever form the students chose: some maintained well-curated blogs, some toted spiral notebooks so they could doodle in the margins, and some kept a collection of Post-Its and napkins and whatever else was handy, and we talked about how the power of multimodality helped to express our wide-ranging responses both in form and content.

We drew upon those reflections and designed the remainder of the curriculum together, as I aim to teach initiative and responsivity, too. Upon discovering, through assigned interviews and informal conversations, that the school lacked adequate books and supplies, the students suggested that we organize a semester-long book drive and so designed flyers and composed social media posts to advertise, all of which were considered part of their writing portfolio. For my part, I asked that they learn how to write formal letters and emails requesting donations, assigning each of them a different local business. As a class, we also composed a collaboratively-written grant proposal. Their final assignment reflected on their experiences and researched their future careers, projecting how they might use the skillsets specific to those careers to continue to practice responsible citizenship. And in one of my proudest moments as an educator, they did just that, vowing to continue volunteering at the preschool and making the book drive an annual event.

I tell such a long story to demonstrate that I see writing as so much more than a set of tools and a collection of rules, all in service of a traditional text. I believe that each of my students brings to the classroom a menagerie of experiences, ideas, and skills unique to him or her—experiences, ideas, and skills that the entire classroom could benefit from knowing. So I ask them to use writing—both the process of and the product—to share those experiences, ideas, and skills.

And in sharing, they (and I, as their instructor) learn.

They learn to think critically through issues, to consider carefully how to present those thoughts, and to question what they might not yet know or understand. In so doing, they develop confidence; confidence

that I use: I ask them to tell me what they need (from their assignments, from the class, from me) so that we may continue to build knowledge together, as my learning community students and I did so well.

In an advanced writing course, my students were expected to compose a twenty-page research paper by semester's end; the crux of the curriculum was review of proper research procedures and academic writing techniques, such as citation, which the program expected the students to have retained from their first-year writing courses. To enliven the process, I devised a Jeopardy game in PowerPoint, which students would tackle in groups. They were allowed all available means to find the answers—the computers in our lab, their textbooks, their cellphones, their brains—and the Final Jeopardy question revealed to them that the point of the entire lesson was to teach them that they knew how to handle this "problem" all along, particularly if they worked together.

Similarly, in a survey of world literature course, which I designed as a tour of the globe, reading texts from new regions every few weeks, I assigned group facilitations: for one class period, select students would be responsible for preparing and moderating class discussion. They were asked to send me a lesson plan, and I gave them free rein in terms of access to resources, since their materials were considered a writing assignment: photocopies, use of the course management system discussion board, creation of a class Facebook group, a projector, chalk, et cetera—all of which they happily mixed and matched. While students often complained in private about the difficulties of understanding the unfamiliar languages and cultures presented in the literature, in front of the class, the groups worked in tandem and acted authoritatively, encouraging insightful conversation and taking the discussion in ways that never would have occurred to me. In this way, they took ownership of their learning.

Digital technologies invigorate this process of ownership. I maintain a shared online space for my students—sometimes a blog, sometimes as part of a course management system—so that our conversations are not confined to the classroom. It is in those online spaces that they respond to readings and complete prewriting activities, often a combination of Internet and database research and good "old-fashioned" word processing. For instance, in a first-year composition course, I tasked small groups with developing counterarguments and refutations and sharing them on a collaborative online document. For homework, I asked them to review each submission and vote, via an anonymous online poll, which one they thought was the most effective. During the next class session, I asked them why (as a class) they'd voted as they did, and let them educate me, interjecting only to ask for clarification.

Because I believe too that knowledge is socially and collaboratively constructed, I place a high value on the practice of peer review in any of my courses that require a significant writing assignment. I time those sessions so that students have not yet been made privy to my commentary on drafts, so that they may navigate the unfamiliar terrain of review unfettered by outside influences. More recently, I have experimented with software that facilitates frequent, asynchronous peer learning via write-revise-feedback cycles that draws on our collective, and growing, expertise. This has helped to build community in my online classes, and also makes space for students to peer review in groups as opposed to partnerships. Students use a describe-suggest-evaluate model when giving feedback to hone their rhetorical awareness; when they return to their own writing, they are able to prioritize their feedback (having seen several models) and compose a well-informed revision plan. In a face-to-face environment, where time is of the essence, I post worksheets on our online space asking students to use multicolored highlights and multicolored text, as well as marginal comments, to identify specific features in a draft. If a student is not certain he or she has identified the feature, he or she must ask the writer, and the two of them must have a conversation about how best to revise the component for greater reader accessibility: they negotiate the genre together.

Indeed, through these kinds of activities, my students build their individual abilities and learn from their peers' strengths. Together, they see the possibilities of writing opened wide to them—and just as important, they see "writing" as more than alphabetic text. If they see themselves as teachers, too, then they have the confidence and tenacity required to be successful writers, which of course, is my aim as a writing teacher. But they have the confidence and tenacity to be critical thinkers and civically-minded people, too—the kind of people who are inclined to contribute to the greater good.