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ADVICE

No, We're Not Teaching Composition 'All Wrong'

Melinda Beck for The Chronicle Review

By Emily Shearer Stewart | NOVEMBER 21, 2016

My students can't write a clear sentence to save their lives. It's my job to help them change that.

I have taught writing for 10 years. Much like Joseph R. Teller, whose October essay criticizing how we teach composition riled many a writing instructor, I have "experimented with different assignments, activities, readings, [and] approaches to commenting on student work." But my results have been very different from his. Rather than seeing my students fail repeatedly, I'm seeing more and more of them succeed.

Their success may stem, in part, from a mantra I've taken to heart: If students consistently fail at something in my classroom, it's not their fault. It's mine.

I teach at a community college in Texas, in a city where almost 20 percent of the citizens live below the poverty line. More than 30 percent of children in the city live in poverty. About 70 percent of my college's students take classes only part-time, and 73 percent entered this year taking at least one developmental course. Most of them have lived and been educated in a system that has overwhelmingly failed them due to a focus on testing rather than learning. Most have taken time away from education to work, so what writing skills they did possess have probably atrophied.

Teller argued that the three pillars of composition pedagogy — that courses should "focus on process, not product," that students should write on "complex issues rather

than imitate rhetorical modes," and that reading and writing should be combined in the same course — don't actually work. But I find they do, and I'm not alone in thinking so.

First, here's a simple truth about the writing process: Contrary to Teller's claim that "students do not revise," I have found that students will revise their drafts, given the tools and time to do so. As we all well know, revision is time-intensive, and time is the most precious commodity most of my students have. It's not enough just to teach revision. It has to be consistently and constantly modeled, which, again, takes time. And students need time to work on their revisions in class — uninterrupted and with my help and supervision. That approach, in my experience, results in revisions that are not only substantial but effective.

Teller also criticized peer workshops, a mainstay of composition instruction, saying, "In peer workshops, while students get more confident in sharing feedback on each other's work, they generally ignore their classmates' suggestions."

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But the point of peer workshops isn't just for students to become confident about reading and weighing on someone else's writing. The point is for students learn how to read their own writing. That, too, has to be consistently and constantly modeled.

Providing specific ideas and goals for students to work on directs their feedback in more productive ways. And again, my help and supervision makes both the process of giving and receiving feedback more useful as well. Rather than a way to "lose another hour of class time," as Teller claims, peer workshops can be a very important use of class time that accomplishes a number of different goals: revision, raising confidence in writing skills, giving feedback, and reading instruction.

At the beginning of each semester, I ask students how many of them think they are bad writers. Without fail, 90 percent of them raise their hands. I tell them they're wrong.

There is no such thing as a bad writer. There is only a writer who needs more practice. Relieving their fear of writing is as important in my job as teaching them how to avoid run-on sentences because without relieving that fear, students will be too afraid to even try writing those run-ons.

I also find it ironic that Teller decries the skill of critical reading while bemoaning his students’ inability to use basic argumentative structures in their writing. How can we teach argumentative structures without asking students to critically read argumentative writing? While I agree that we must avoid letting themed content take over in our writing courses, there’s no reason that the two can’t coexist. I am a firm believer that the more students read and the more they write, the better their writing will become.

So how can I help my students become better writers?

Here is how I approached teaching 150 first-year composition students this fall.

Students need to be constantly writing. They should write, whether or not they receive feedback from me on each draft. The more comfortable they feel with the writing process, the more confident they will become in their own skills and their own ideas. I set up a lot of low-risk writing assignments nearly every day in class to give students the ability to experiment with techniques without worrying about failure.

Be a mentor, not merely a judge and jury. Of course I give grades. But at the end of the day, my responsibility is to help students become better writers, better students, and better citizens. I can’t do that by blaming them for their inability to write. Nor can I do it by taking over part of the writing process for them and essentially giving them a list of things to "fix." Instead I encourage students to see me as their writing mentor, which lessens the sense of fear that many of my students begin the semester with.

Students need to be interacting with ideas. I would much rather read a sophisticated, intricate argument that is not grammatically or structurally correct than an argument that follows strict rhetorical rules and only skims the surface of ideas. Simply teaching the technical skills of writing supposes that writing is just that — a skill — rather than an art. We do not hand students a toolbox with the hammer of Aristotelian logic and the wrench of rhetoric. We teach them to paint, sometimes with exacting realism,

sometimes with abstract thought, and sometimes with breathtaking impressionism. We can't do that if we aren't teaching them about the ideas they're trying to represent.

The writing process is as important as the product. Of course students can sit down the night before and hammer out an essay worth an A. I did it several times as an undergraduate. But that essay could also be better had it gone through the process. And while I will not fail an essay for not having gone through multiple drafts, I will penalize it.

Model what I want students to do. I show students how to do peer review. We workshop thesis statements. And I ask for honest feedback from students about my assignments and how I can refine them so they are clearer to understand. I ask students about which of my in-class assignments worked — and which didn't — so that I can improve my teaching.

I am not going to save the world in my composition classes. I know that. But through them, I can make the world a little better. I can make students less afraid of writing. I can let them know that their professor is here to help them find their voice; that they have something worth saying, even if they aren't sure how to say it yet; and that the writing process leads to a product that is worthwhile and something to be proud of.

In Teller's rather grumpy essay, he suggested that his decision to focus on writing technique — and avoid issues or difficult reading assignments — would probably mean that "by the end of the semester, my students will hate my course because it is 'boring,' 'hard,' and 'a lot of work.' … But if they show up, do the work, and turn off their phones, they just might leave my class able to write a sentence."

By the end of the semester, I expect, many of my students will be groaning about my composition course, too. It's also hard work — and a lot of it. I get frustrated with them at times. They get frustrated with me. We work through it together and keep plugging along.

But if they show up, turn off their phones, and do the work, then not only will they leave my class able to write a sentence, they will leave as stronger writers who believe in their own ideas and abilities, and who find themselves more prepared for the rest of their academic — and nonacademic — careers.

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