

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

If there is all-encompassing goal that I have developed and worked toward since I began teaching in 2002, it has to do with my focus on a single word: connections. I have taught writing to students with wide ranging backgrounds and whether the student is an eighteen year-old from Kenya or a 58 year-old computer programmer from Worcester they all want to know how a college writing course connects to them and to their career goals. Long gone are the years where students sat quietly in a classroom and went through the motions, assuming that what they were learning was somehow relevant to their future. Today, more and more students are active participants in their own learning. There is not a passive approach, not an attitude of laissez-faire learning, but a process of becoming informed, not only about their specific subject, but also about their career goals.

As an English composition instructor, perhaps I have encountered more student doubts about the relevance of writing as it relates to any number of subjects. The results of these good-natured questions have helped me form the principles that make up the foundation of my teaching philosophy.

The WOW Factor

After having heard many of the unsatisfactory explanations addressing the ‘why do I need to take an English class?’ question, I decided during those first few semesters that honesty would have to be my first guide. In relation to the WOW factor, a concept that describes the way an instructor engages students in a course by sharing their expertise and passion for their subject, honesty is an absolute essential. Thankfully, the character of the professor as a remote, all-knowing dispenser of information is giving way to a model in which I act more like the leader of a troupe on an expedition. The strength of the community that develops as a result of my leadership stance depends on how successfully I expose my own questions, theories and ideas to the students and how well I set-up an environment for them to do the same. It would not be an overstatement to say that more than any other factor, my openness and the consequent discussions with students have been responsible for my success over the past ten years.

Community

In what I now recognize as my first attempts to develop a community within my classroom, I proceeded to respond to those initial questions about the relevance of composition as honestly as possible. At the very least, I reasoned, my answer would model a respectable approach to learning. “I’m not sure,” I told the students. “But I will find out.” I did find out. My genuine and thoughtful consideration sharpened my focus on the connection that exists between writing and thinking. Everything about the writing process, from the purpose and intention of an assignment to the step-by-step development of a piece of writing, causes the student to

engage in and practice a certain type of thinking. If a student planned to use thinking after graduation, I said, then a writing course would help them develop the necessary tools. Fortunately, not every student is convinced by this idea, and this healthy skepticism prompts me to refine, reword and demonstrate the idea in new and more effective ways.

Clarity

Without clarity of purpose and intention, only the exceptional student will manage to succeed in a college-level course. I feel fortunate to have been teaching in a discipline where the attention to language, interpretation, and meaning preside over all else. The stress on proper word choice, the way context alters information, and the very real limits of communication in a two-dimensional space are crucial to success in any writing course. Because of this, I am well prepared and well equipped to teach online courses. The successful development and articulation of ideas through the writing process takes on a renewed importance in the world of cyber-education. Miscommunications and misunderstandings can derail a student's progress and without the usual face-to-face resolution offered by the classroom explanation, a student travel so far down the wrong path that correction feels overwhelming and impossible. Frequent communication online is one guard against this outcome, but a serious attention to a specific and thorough explanation can help to propel a student above and beyond their limitations. As I have fully integrated the Blackboard and Sakai course management systems into my courses. I have experienced and overcome many of the obstacles presented by strictly written communication in which body language and tone of voice have no effect. I have developed a process by which I consciously call to mind the requirements for a given assignment before I focus my attention on the language that offers the best chance for a clear and concise communication.

Feedback

There can be no doubt that the expansion of the online world into teaching benefits the students in the area of feedback. By giving them direct access to graded assignments and the accompanying comments or explanations, the Internet helps to close the learning circle. This too reflects a learning environment that has altered dramatically from the past. Instead of using tests and final papers in the way one uses a period to mark the end of a sentence, the online environment can transform these into learning tools. The emphasis on getting it right or wrong can give way to a more realistic and complex assessment from which the student can continue to develop. More and more it seems that higher education values the teaching of skills over the ability to memorize and regurgitate information. In this way, online education moves beyond the simple concept of being a digitized version of a traditional classroom to becoming an environment and tool in its own right. Once the process of translating traditional classroom practices into an online version is complete, cyber-education will create new and unique opportunities for exploring and instructing, leading to the discovery of pedagogical approaches and techniques that have thus far been impossible to conceive.