



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CREATIVITY MATTERS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Students hate writing essays. Writing takes concentration, dedication, and hours of hard work. There are just too many “cooler” things to do. Who has the time to sit at a computer and write when that same computer offers hours of social networking and millions of YouTube videos? Now, this information is not new. It is part of the teaching challenge. But what may be new is how absolutely critical it is for composition instructors to consider this competition and give students more than just writing instruction.

You Think; Therefore, You Write

More than just writing, thinking is the main objective in my class. I want my students to think differently, think like writers, and improve their writing skills. To accomplish this, students have to be comfortable in a challenging subject that is easy to dislike. Writing is difficult. But before I can help my students like writing and want to write, I must help them see that they can do it. Confidence is crucial.

Making writing fun is the key to fostering confidence; students get better doing what they enjoy. The best way to make writing fun and student-friendly is to incorporate stress-free, personal, and creative writing exercises and assignments into the curriculum. Allow students to write about what matters to them, and encourage them to invest themselves in what they write with free expression and social consciousness—two necessary components of a successful composition class. The outcome, based on my experience, is not just a better awareness of the community and how students see themselves, but an appreciation and foundation for strong writing.

Practice Makes Perfect

One of my students, Danielle, improved her writing significantly this past semester. In an end-of-semester letter to future students, she hints at this progress: “At the beginning of the class, I was always nervous that what I wrote was not right or it was stupid. After a while, I realized that if I was confident in my writing,

and if I was not nervous about writing, I could get a good grade.” What is more important than Danielle admitting that she feels better about writing, however, is her realization that confident writing is better writing. I emphasize this throughout the semester; I want my students to be direct and precise in their language and sentences, to write with confidence. But this is next to impossible if students do not like writing or feel unsure of themselves as writers.

Part of my objective (and, I would argue, obligation) as an English instructor is to help students enjoy writing. Practice makes perfect, and the formal, out-of-class essays my students write are practices, trial runs. After all, I tell my students that the word essay comes from the French *essayer*, “to attempt.” In this way, I view the entire course as training for their future—preparation for future academic courses, careers, and personal expression. Writing is everywhere; and after my course, students are better equipped to participate. But to view the assignments and course as practice, training to become a better writer, relieves some of the pressures and apprehensions students have as first-year college students in a writing class. Take away the pressure, and students loosen up, become more confident, and write better.

I do not grade everything my students submit. Sometimes, I keep them guessing as to whether the assignment they hand in will be returned with a grade and comments, or just comments. This, too, allows students to experiment, try new things, and enjoy themselves. Writing is fun, grades are not, and sometimes grades can get in the way of learning.

Creative Writing in Composition Class

I tell my students at the beginning of the semester that I am a writer. I hold an MFA from a program that does not believe in grades. What I do not say is that my background gives me a unique perspective on writing and how it should be taught.

To teach composition writing as a creative writer, I encourage a relaxed and organic classroom environment. When class size allows, we all sit in a circle, a common practice among teachers, but especially helpful in the composition classroom because it aides



discussion and helps the students interact with one another. I sit with my students in the circle, emphasizing that I am in the writing process with them, strengthening the sense of community. Writing in English 101 should be a communal practice, a dialogue between the author and the rest of the campus. In this regard, students write with a clear audience, an audience that includes our college president and themselves. Writing is stressful, but some of its difficulty and frustration may be alleviated when students know they are not writing alone.

One of my favorite assignments, the assignment that gives me the best results and highest student grades, is one the class does together, what I call the *New York Times* Combat (NYTC). First, I ask students to choose an article that they oppose from the Opinion Section of the *Times*, and then I ask them to argue against the issues raised in their article. Here, students choose their own essay topic, make the assignment personal, and current events get incorporated into our classroom discussions. And the assignment's benefits seem to last and have a direct impact. Authors of engaging and persuasive essays are asked to share their work with the community, perhaps publish in the school or local newspapers.

In addition, the NYTC culminates with each student presenting before the class. Presentations not only spark debate and help students see a direct result of good writing, but the class gains a better understanding of issues affecting its community and our world. Writing about controversial issues, issues about which students feel passionately, and writing about them in a way that fosters critical thinking, debate, and awareness, gives energy to student writing. Writing with this energy is a clear step to writing well.

In my class, students regularly weigh in on the work of their classmates, at times being more brutally honest than I am. Peer workshops allow for better writing; students learn from one another, and their essays improve. Teamwork works, and writing is fun when it is part of a dialogue within the community. The composition classroom works better when everyone is on the same page (figuratively and literally).

In graduate school, I read short stories by writers such as Updike, Millhauser, Walker, Davis, and others, as a study of how to write a short story. And so, I teach stories and essays (by some of these same writers) to help illustrate effective writing. Students enjoy reading short stories; stories get students excited about writing. And good writing is good writing. Students learn how to write well by seeing how it is done, regardless of genre.

Write What You Like

Good writers are good readers. I tell my students to read everything, even the cereal box. I introduce them to several contemporary authors in class; and we read a

book together, all in an effort to learn how to write better. Reading fiction like a writer gets students thinking about what they read in new ways, and it gets them thinking about subjects and situations that might never come up in the classroom. One of my most memorable class discussions involved the concept of forgiveness in an adulterous affair and whether the author has an ethical obligation to weigh in on the issue when talking about it in a story.

This is the goal of my composition class: to cultivate an environment where different ideas are discussed and students are questioning and thinking. Essentially, it is about finding what turns students on and the subject matter that students can connect with on a personal level—the subject matter that compels them to write. Allow students to write about something they care about, and show them how their writing can make a difference. With that, you have a no-fail recipe for strong writing.

I want my students to think like writers and confront the challenges of going from blank computer screen to finished essay head-on, with confidence and a smile. Not making writing fun and not giving students confidence and enjoyment from their work limits their potential and makes teaching and learning a lot more difficult.

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