TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION: MAKING THE BEST OF IT

Passaic County Community College's student body is diverse—culturally, religiously, and economically. It is often hard to know where to start when it comes to teaching writing to such a diverse group where needs vary so widely. Often classrooms consist of ESL learners new to the country and students from nearby high schools such as Eastside High which was brought to the attention of educators and film viewers alike with "Lean on Me," a film based on principal Joe Clark who used controversial methods to shake up learning in a crime-ridden high school.

Often, I am fighting the wave of technology that keeps students from learning in the classroom. The "smart classroom" which is technologically equipped to allow both teacher and student access to a computer is my worst nightmare. I have to resort to locking down computers during lecture on top of competing with iphones. I miss the days of chalk dust on my fingers!

Out of Touch

Early spring semester 2009, the national election was a hot topic. When I asked for a show of hands from those who watched the inauguration, few hands went up. I was shocked at how disconnected students were from the outside world that greatly influences their way of living, freedoms, achievements, and philosophies. It was a discovery I had not anticipated.

Community

As a journalism teacher, I often encourage students to stay current with news and trends. Even in the composition classroom, students can be assigned to follow a current happening in their community and be asked to write a letter to the editor on an issue. It is a perfect place to begin with audience. Students should be encouraged to read other letters to the editor. What letters make them cringe? What letters persuade them to take a closer look at a topic they have not considered or even agree with? Why?

And when they write their letter, they should be encouraged to take a close look at the population; consider the majority group, the minority group, and approximate age of any given community; and write for an audience that will be the hardest to persuade to their side of an issue. Then, encourage students to submit their letters.

Ownership

Students must take ownership for thinking through their claims and back them up with logical evidence or analysis. This is important in a world that favors anonymous blogs or looks to Simon from "American Idol" as an example of how to critique. These trends are not completely new. I grew up with "The Gong Show." If an act fell below the audience's expectations, it was thrown off stage.

In an often cruel world that is not academically oriented, we ask students to write responsibly. If one must own up to a claim, there is a certain responsibility to self, family, and community, as well as to the person, idea, or philosophy under attack. It is important for students to see how their actions can be agents of change, but also how they can be acts of carelessness or misdirected anger.

Confidence

Having students follow current events builds confidence. The more they know the world around them, the more they can interact with that world on paper. Despite technology that puts everything at the touch of their fingers, they have come to hide behind a virtual curtain. Dating and friendships can exist without ever having to meet in person. MySpace, Facebook, and the like went from networking tools to communities. Students are not informed of the new park going up down the street that will cost tax dollars or the budget that was not passed to improve their public schools. They do not know their next-door neighbors.

Pleading the Fifth

It is easy to sympathize with the student who works full-time, has a family to support, and goes to school

part-time. But we must not let that become a bar that lowers expectations. Students often plead the Fifth when asked if they spent time reading the assigned chapter. Sometimes I have learned later that most chose not to buy the textbook because it was too expensive. I notice that often the same students who make that choice have a better cell phone than I do. Most do not see it as a choice to give up that toy for a chance at a better education.

Narrative

There may be ways to navigate around the tough exterior of complacent students and give them an opportunity to consider their places in the world. A first-week assignment might have students write an autobiography, a strategy I first employed when I began teaching online classes and wanted students to get to know each other by posting information about themselves. It generated a sincere interest in the backgrounds of their peers. In response, I asked them to write an essay on the autobiography that caught their interest and why. It was a beginning to understanding the motivation of more famous writers as we read works of fiction and non-fiction. This essay was to be a place for academic self-discovery.

Role Models

I took full advantage of the fact that our Poetry Cultural Center, located just down the street, encouraged the arts and focused on narratives. Physically bringing writers to the classroom sparked interest, encouraged questions, and made writing and reading real.

It is not enough to assign a reading or ask students to write an essay. This generation wants you to give them evidence as to why this is important. I do not suggest we give up technology, rather that we ask less of what it can do for us and ask more of what we can do for it.

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