Teaching and Learning on the Page

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Over my many years as a faculty member on our campus, I have taught more than a few different courses, but through it all there has been one constant: engaging students, and most especially engaging student texts. My courses typically stress opportunities for ethnographic work in a service-learning or civic-engagement context, or work done in the context of a client or real-world project. Because I see writing, and the teaching of writing, as "knowledge in the making," I am quite interested in the connections between writing and design, for writing is, at its heart, a design art.

Challenging my students to move beyond their comfort zones and take risks, I seek to foster classes that are inquiry-driven and form a community of practice. I measure the success of my teaching by looking for this one fundamental transformation: students may enter the classroom seeing themselves as taking a writing class, but somewhere during the semester I hope they begin to see themselves as writers, writing in a community of other writers.

When we teach students "on the page," their own work becomes generative, opening new perspectives for all in the class. Together we focus on the craft of writing, and larger rhetorical or theoretical points are always anchored in their own writing. When we bring student writing into the classroom and allow it to take center stage, we are doing far more than introducing one more element to the mix: we are fundamentally shifting the dynamics of our teaching. Student texts can thus make our classroom teaching *kairotic.* Classrooms become timely spaces for teaching when we are willing to entertain and help sharpen the very ideas that students bring through the door.

When students learn on the page, they do more than sit in class and turn in assignments; they become involved in an apprenticeship. When I think back to teachers and writers who have had considerable influence on me, I recall looking over their shoulders. They invited me to inhabit their minds and imaginations, to observe hidden steps in their thinking as they engaged an intellectual problem or revised a text to let a muffled idea speak more clearly. I may not remember the specific writing task but I do recall their conceptual moves, their habits of mind. I learned as an apprentice—by doing and by working next to someone who does it well. Because workshops ask students to shuttle back and forth between actual writing and an array of potential strategies, we can model those moves for them—and they can test the moves on us. In so doing, we acquaint them with both the skills they need and the habits of mind those skills require.

The workshop or seminar dramatizes a theater of the mind. It is a stage on which students voice and play out their inquiry—an inquiry that might otherwise remain silent, solitary. Shared inquiry demands dialogue, and dialogue is the essence of drama. As we help students pursue a line of inquiry, as we ask skeptical questions that seem to challenge the very conclusions to be drawn, as we give advice about tone and phrasing and listen to and answer our students' questions about their own logic and rhetorical strategies, we are setting ideas in action, dramatizing the dialogue that always occurs between reader and writer. Ideally, our own teaching should be inquiry's most eloquent model.

Much of the drama that can occur in a writing workshop or seminar shaped by student texts lies in revealing the connection between page and principle. When we and our students comment on an essay, we are attending to what's on the page. And yet if we are to make sense of teaching and learning on the page, we also must attend to general but often unspoken principles and strategies. In a sense we are forever shuttling back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, between immediate application and theory. That middle ground is *techne*—craft, knack, know-how—and it becomes the stage on which the workshop's drama plays itself out. *Techne* is associated with the creative process, with the very "making" (*poiesis*) of knowledge. A fundamental outcome of any writing workshop should be the development of informed judgment, or what in rhetorical terms has been called *phronesis*—practical wisdom. I like to think of *phronesis* as the cardinal virtue of an effective writing workshop or seminar, the virtue from which all other virtues flow.

We all hope to be challenged by our students (or at least we say we do). But little do we realize that to be *challenged* by them we must also be willing to be *changed* by them. The drama of the workshop begins when we are willing to be taught by our own students. The many workshop or seminar roles we play help dramatize for our students the process of serous, imaginative inquiry. That inquiry should extend to our own teaching. One of the secret rewards of teaching a writing workshop or seminar that places student texts at its center is that the process constantly invites us to question and revise our own classroom practice. The pandemic has provided that opportunity. For all the shortcomings of teaching via Zoom, the virtual classroom can still be an engaging and spontaneous space, chiefly because I put students and their texts at the forefront. Those texts—and the comments of students on those texts—require that we respond in the moment and think on our feet. Working with these texts places a premium on our improvisational readiness to engage the unexpected and seize its opportunities. By embracing the uncertainties of teaching with student texts, we learn even as we teach.