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PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

I believe that understanding how writing works is important for students. Instead of simply being told what to write or how to fix their grammar, students do best when they first have knowledge of what we know to be true about writing and learning to write. To me, it's analogous to teaching science. For instance, when we teach students about structure of an atom, we first teach them about the experiments that led to such discoveries. We tell them how Ernest Rutherford shot alpha particles at gold foil, and how some of those particles came straight back while other deflected a bit or went straight through. In this way, we show students how we can logically conclude that atoms are made of a solid nucleus surrounded by largely empty space. Likewise, if we read, discuss, and share research about writing with students, they will hopefully understand why we are telling them to engage in certain tasks, ask certain questions, and make appropriate decisions as they write.

My composition students read *Naming What We Know*, so that they learn from the experts that writing is a social activity, how writing creates meaning, and why writing enacts identities. All the while, my students keep a journal and reflect on their current and developing literacy practices. They learn about themselves as readers and writers and examine their growth in those areas. At the same time, I have them practice in as many different forms or genres as time allows. We write a "book" together on our class wiki. They each keep a blog; the individual posts are then syndicated to a class blog, where we can discuss the issues presented. They send me topic proposals via a professional email. They craft short and long academic essays. Their research paper includes interviews and ethnographic studies about the writing habits of those in their chosen major. Throughout these writing tasks, we discuss what the experts have to say about writing and how their own writing life is reflected in the research about writing.

My classes also focus on the connection between writing and reading, between writers and audience. We carefully examine all kinds of texts: books, essays, videos, cartoons, webpages, as well as a bit of fiction and poetry. I help them to tease out the choices made by the creator of the text. We discuss what effect those choices have on the reader and how those choices are meant to develop the writer's purpose. My hope is that they will realize that their words have power—they can and should make choices to influence readers. My goal is to help them see that writing is always about an audience on the other end, even if that audience is oneself at some time in the future. I hope my students will learn to ask the questions a reader would ask so that they make the best rhetorical choices so that readers will understand their message.

I also strongly believe in creating a team of learners—a group of people who work together to reach a set goal, where individual accomplishments and the group outcomes are both valued. Because writing can be such a personal adventure, an activity in which we share what's on our

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hearts and minds, students need a secure place to take chances and grow. They need a place where they can safely interact with other maturing writers. I make sure that we take time to learn each other's names. We establish class ground rules—especially about listening to understand rather than impatiently waiting to respond. They need to negotiate a world of readers with varying expectations; therefore, I want them to feel as if they can depend on each other to express those varying expectations and discover together how to navigate rhetorical contexts. That way, I hope they are somewhat better prepared when they enter a professional world where they may not always feel comfortable.

Finally, I am a firm believer in assessment of student writing that goes beyond the classroom instructor. Evaluating writing, after all, is highly subjective. Moreover, the “halo effect” truly exists: Faculty, especially when they become close to their students, often overestimate their students' writing skills. Plus, students should do more than just write for their instructor. They should be writing for the public, but they should also be writing for an audience who will evaluate their writing—just as a supervisor will someday. Consequently, I think we need a check on what happens in the classroom. Students should prove that they have met the learning outcomes to someone besides their instructor because writing is rarely for an audience of one. And, when it is for an audience of one, it simply means “one at a time.” The next audience of one will probably be a completely different someone. An assessment that lets students know how knowledgeable others view their writing is actually a gift we can give to our students.