Teaching the Most Important Things

By Donald Gallehr

At the end of each semester, I collect student portfolios to read and grade, then stack them in boxes and file cabinets. Those who want their portfolios back pick them up at the beginning of the next semester. Between semesters I browse through them, searching for clues that tell me how to improve my teaching. Then, days before the start of classes, I revise my syllabus. Sometimes changes are major, but mostly they are refinements.

This time I looked at my syllabus and realized that the most important things I teach are the foundation of everything else. At first I thought of them as intangibles, but the more I recalled my classes, the more I realized that even when the lessons are amorphous, results are tangible. They show up as intense quiet when someone is reading, as great noise when everyone is talking at once, as the close, face-to-face position of chairs in response groups, as a smile on the writer who has finally got it, as students coming early and leaving late, and as erupting, spontaneous applause.

I teach freshmen who are required to take English 101—some of whom have squeezed out of high school just as some of my students squeeze out of college. I also teach juniors and seniors who work as interns in corporations hoping to make a career of writing—any kind of writing. And then I teach graduate students who may some day teach, as well as teachers who want to be better teachers of writing. Some of my students are, by college standards, basic writers, and some of these are international students who still struggle with English. Others are intelligent in ways other than verbal—such as athletes, dancers, computer whizzes, musicians, and accountants. And some of my students are truly talented writers who on their own are writing film scripts, family histories, and novels.

Regardless of who I teach or at what level I teach, the most important things I teach are the same—love of writing, learning the writer’s mind, fitting the writing into your dream, and building on what works.

1. Love the Writing

It’s now hard for me to imagine my teaching writing for thirteen years before discovering my own love of writing, but that’s exactly what happened. I had chosen the Civil War as my topic of interest for the 1978 Northern Virginia Writing Project Summer Institute, and one of my four points of view was a short story about a soldier from New York in the battle of Second Manassas. The soldier had been in the war for over a year and was again facing a major defeat. Like some of the soldiers in the real war, this one decided it was time to quit—so in the middle of the deafening fire of muskets and cannon, he slipped unnoticed into the woods.

It didn’t matter that I was not a very good writer, or that I was an ignorant writer of fiction, because over time, practice would improve my writing. What mattered was that I was caught up in saying something that mattered to me.

Students are not able to write short stories in 101 or 489, Advanced Non-Fiction Writing, because these are nonfiction courses. But they can, and do, select topics that they can write passionately about, topics that will consume them as the Civil War consumed me. Catherine wrote about crew, a sport that triggers her endorphins and makes her life healthy. Madeleine wrote about the Women’s Center in Vienna where she found sanctuary after an abusive relationship. Matt wrote about being a Vegan and tried to convince his response group to become vegetarians.

How do I teach this? By asking them to write about things that really interest them. If I get a sense that they’re selecting topics that are easy, ones they’ve written about before, or ones that might impress or satisfy others, I bring them back with questions such as, “What do you really want to write about?” I also tell them that this class is a rare opportunity, and for some of them, their last opportunity, to spend a semester writing about things they’re really interested in. Not all my students like to write, especially my freshmen. But they do love writing about the topic that consumes them. I figure that if they can have at least one such experience with writing, they can repeat it.

2. Learn Your Writer’s Mind

James Moffett advocated writing as one means of watching our thoughts, of getting a grasp on our inner speech. He also advocated suspending inner speech as a way to higher knowledge. By letting go of chatter, other sections of our brains can function, including intuition and holistic thinking. Furthermore, suspending inner speech also gives our minds a rest, and we come back to the writing refreshed. The fresh mind writes with little or no impediment, achieving a “depth and fluency,”
Moffett says, “that writing teachers should pay attention to...” Even for those of us who are naturally nonverbal, suspending repetitious activity gives us a rest.

I talk about the writer’s mind in my classes—I talk of how I handle distractions, how I respond to fears and desires, how I bring my mind back to the writing each time it wanders off. Of course, I also tell students that I sometimes follow an impulse that pulls me away from the writing. I show them my writer’s mind by writing on the board and talking aloud as I write. I show them drafts of pieces I am working on so that they will know my triumphs and struggles.

I sit next to them when they write in class, listen and ask them questions when I think their answers would reveal to them their writer’s mind. I collect a process log from them each week as they submit a new or substantially revised draft. I sit in on their response groups, and I read their portfolio prefaces. I go to class early and leave late, strike up conversations about their writing topics, school, campus parties and politics. It takes about a month before I know them well enough to really teach, to guide them so that they, too, will become aware of how their minds work when they write.

I give them exercises that expand their writer’s mind—intuition exercises with holistic questions such as, “What does this writing want to become?” I give them clearing the mind exercises which I call “worry sheets,” and encourage them to clear their minds before they begin each writing session and whenever necessary throughout the writing. Of course there are times when they can’t, when life is so upsetting that they are overwhelmed, when their jobs or girlfriends and boyfriends, family emergencies and illness make it difficult to concentrate. I tell them to pay attention to the upset, and if appropriate, write about it as part of a larger, ongoing topic. I tell them to work it through, if possible—and sometimes I urge them to talk to the people involved.

By the end of the semester, I hope they can watch their thoughts, watch the movement of their writer’s mind, label their thoughts, and let them go so that they can return to the writing. Those who can, stay with the writing for longer and longer periods of time, and access more complex and sophisticated ideas and images.

3. Fit the Writing Into Your Dream

I’m writing this on the 35th anniversary of the March On Washington and the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. Most of us have at least one dream—that large wish that we are drawn to, that guiding image that urges us to say “yes” here and “no” there, that thought we return to when we have a moment by ourselves.

I usually don’t require my students to write about their dreams—I simply ask them, “What do you want to do with your life?” Their answers include: write for a specific publication, be a good parent, sail around the world, fly an airplane, eradicate world hunger, clean up the environment, write comic books, become a teacher. Of course, I also have the occasional, “I don’t know.”

When my students write about their dream, they do some of their most powerful writing. Because a dream is something they have thought about over a period of time, they have done a fair amount of “research” about the topic and are usually eager to do more. And because they are connecting the writing to themselves, they find these pieces easier to write.

Michelle, for example, was born in Nova Scotia, lived for a brief while in Arizona, and wants to live in Arizona after she graduates. She flew to Phoenix during spring break to find her childhood home, and even though she couldn’t find it, she has no doubt that she wants to live there more than anything else. Writing about this experience has sharpened her understanding of where her dream came from and why it is so strong. Jennifer, after a one-year struggle with anorexia and bulimia, wants to stay healthy and at all costs avoid situations which would trigger binge eating and purging. Writing for the first time about her struggles and reading her writing to her response group has strengthened her writing and her resolve.

4. Build on What Works

The writer is particularly interested in what works, since most effective writing is built from extending and reinforcing the positive elements in a piece of writing.

—Donald Murray

Finding the positive works better than any other way of looking at a draft. It doesn’t do any good for me or the student to treat a first draft to a slather of red ink. Better we

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Baby Josie
by Tom Crane
Only one week old and
can already smile.
She clutches my finger so hard
sometimes it hurts.
Her eyes dart around
taking everything in.
She is so small she could
fit in a doll’s clothes.
When she cries sounds like a car
running out of gas.

I love my new sister as much as a lion
loves its cubs.

Poetry is far too important to leave outside
our classroom doors. Our students are
loaded with the images, ideas, and concrete
details needed to produce poetry. We need
only allow a little inspiration, supplemented
by a touch of technique, and soon our
students will be producing poems faster
than we can read them.

Reference
Lane, B. (1993). After the end: Teaching and
learning creative revision. Portsmouth, NH:
Heinemann.

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should read through and look for parts that
work, even if there is only one. We can then
set aside the rest and head into draft two.
Over time, the writing takes shape and the
meaning emerges.

There are those rare times when a first draft
works. Then the writer can go directly intoediting. But those are truly rare occasions.
Most of the time, even with considerable
mapping and thinking, and even for
accomplished writers, the first draft needs
revision. First drafts are for the writer, later
drafts are for the reader, and one way of
knowing you have a final draft is when the
ego of the writer has been worked out of the
writing. In an earlier draft of this article, I
wrote, “Perhaps we are a measure of our
dreams.” It sounds great, doesn’t it, almost
Shakespearean. But I didn’t know what it
meant. I think I was saying that there seems
to be a connection between people who
dream large dreams and people whom we
consider larger than life. Once I figured that
out, I realized it had nothing to do with my
article and the reader would not benefit
from hearing it.

Selecting only those things that work in a
draft is also positive. I tell my students that
writing is such a difficult activity that we
need all the encouragement we can get.

Selecting what works conserves and
focuses our energies on building, not
destroying.

These most important things guide my
teaching and help me to stay focused.
Under them I teach things as large as how
to write a book and as small as where to
place a comma. I want my students to have
their own “most important things” and I
hope theirs will be as large.

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