

ADVICE

Are We Teaching Composition All Wrong?

Students understand why Barbie is sexist, but they can't make their case in a coherent essay

By Joseph R. Teller | OCTOBER 03, 2016



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My students can't write a clear sentence to save their lives, and I've had it.

In 10 years of teaching writing, I have experimented with different assignments, activities, readings, approaches to commenting on student work — you name it — all to help students write coherent prose that someone would actually want to read. And as anyone who keeps up with trends in higher education knows, such efforts largely fail.

For a while now, compositionists have been enamored of a pedagogical orthodoxy that assumes the following:

- Composition courses must focus on process, not just product.
- Students should compose essays that tackle complex issues rather than imitate rhetorical modes (as in the much-maligned "current-traditional" pedagogy of years

past).

- Writing and reading instruction should be combined in the same course.

After years of experimenting with those three principles, here's what I've learned: They rarely work.

First, a simple truth: Students do not revise. This cuts to the very heart of how most of us teach composition. It is an a priori assumption that a composition course must emphasize revision: Writers learn to make rhetorical decisions based on their audience, and that means the arduous process of "substantial revision."

But substantial revision doesn't happen in our courses. I have tried requiring students to write only three essays developed over several drafts, each of which I comment on without a grade. I have used peer workshops to help students respond to each other's writing. I have used portfolio systems and deferred-grading schemes. I have cajoled; I have encouraged; I have experimented with more rubrics than I can count.

The invariable result? Weak drafts remain weak; stronger drafts get slightly stronger, but not by much.

In peer workshops, while students get more confident in sharing feedback on each other's work, they generally ignore their classmates' suggestions. And more often than not, when they do revise based on peer feedback, it's often unhelpful and inexperienced advice — for example, telling a student that the paper has a clear thesis when it has no coherent argument at all.

Yes, some professors assert that workshops allow students to find blind spots in each other's essays. But, as their teacher, I can do that more succinctly and quickly, and it wouldn't require the loss of another hour of class time.

A second observation: Even when students engage complex issues from readings in their papers, they do not use the basic argumentative structures they need in order to give their ideas voice, cohesion, and support.

In a recent course, I gave students a set of readings on liberal education and its role in a democratic society. Now, class discussion had been interesting, and students had struggled productively to understand Seneca, John Henry Newman, Mike Rose, and Rabindranath Tagore; they had even produced essays with some refreshing insights. But few of their essays contained a clear and unifying argument, and many students seemed unable to focus on one point for more than a paragraph.

Let me put it another way: How can students make effective rhetorical choices if they do not know what choices exist?

If a student's essay on mass shootings could benefit from a broader discussion of the causes of violence, but the student does not know what it means to argue by causation, then in what sense is an effective rhetorical choice available to her? Writing well involves making rhetorical decisions, but it's clear that you can't choose from what you don't know.

Finally, it's a mistake to insist that "critical reading" should be as integral to a writing course as the teaching of argumentation, structure, paragraphs, and sentences.

First, study after study shows that reading comprehension is tied to background knowledge and context. So while we can teach general strategies for "reading actively" in our composition courses, there is no such thing as a universal approach to reading aside from a few basic principles: Read slowly and deliberately, annotate as you read, make summary notes, connect to the knowledge you already have. That's why most composition instructors thematize their courses. We realize that we cannot talk about "reading" very long before we have to talk about reading about something.

Second, because "reading strategies" are context-bound, many composition instructors make their courses about their themes, which leads to two problems: (1) The course becomes more about the content than about writing at the nuts-and-bolts level, and (2) a number of composition instructors, for reasons stemming from the structures of higher education, are not academically qualified to be teaching disciplinary content (e.g., sociology, cultural history, gender criticism) with any semblance of expertise.

That is why students in a composition course can talk about, say, the role of sexism in children's toys, but can't write a clear sentence about it. In short, the more time a course focuses on "critical reading" and content, the less time it spends on structure, argument, evidence, logical reasoning, and concise, clear prose — the tools a composition class should give undergraduates.

So how can I help my students write better?

Some of the following injunctions might reek of the "current-traditional." But they have been my interior manifesto as I move forward with this fall's set of 100 students:

- Students need to write an actual essay and receive feedback on it from me very early in the course. Whether I use neo-Aristotelian rhetoric or process pedagogy, by Week 2 of the semester, students need to have written a short argumentative essay and received feedback on their thesis, use of evidence, and integration of sources. There is no excuse for students to be halfway through the semester without having received this kind of clear response.
- Students need to spend less time on difficult texts and more time writing arguments. The more time one spends on content, the less time one has for structure and form. Even if I require only three major essays developed through several drafts, more homework assignments should be short essays that receive clear feedback. Alternatively, I might structure a course around many short argumentative essays that emphasize rhetorical structure, building up to larger essays. Either way, the point is frequent essays, frequent feedback.
- Not every essay requires multiple drafts or peer response. I have foolishly assumed that students cannot submit an essay before having spent at least one class period hashing over a draft with their peers. That should change. Yes, students should be encouraged to read each other's writing and learn to respond to it. But let's face it: Unless one believes a writing teacher's feedback carries no more weight than anyone else's, this is unnecessary for *every* essay. (Some academics do claim that a writing teacher's comments are no more authoritative than any other reader's, but I doubt such instructors tell their own editors anything like that.)

- The writing process is a means to an end. Of course the writing process is important: It can be therapeutic, formative, an aid to figuring out what we believe, the record of a mental life, an endless imaginative resource. But in a freshman composition course, process serves product. Let me put it this way: If a bright student sits down the night before a paper is due and hammers out an excellent essay in one draft, do I fail that paper? If I do, then I am not ultimately interested in helping students write effective essays, but in something else.
- Sometimes it's better to ditch an essay and move forward. Even professional writers admit that, at some point, you throw out a project and start over, or you put a project away to work on later (or never). Substantial revision is part of writing, but not for every project. After all, a number of writing contexts do not require, and might even be hampered by, overwrought attempts at revision. Sometimes writing has to come out adequate the first time. And "process" does not have to be restricted to a single piece. Being a writer is a process, too, a process of moving from one project to another, of learning from what worked the last time and what didn't, of knowing when to revise and when to hit the delete key.
- My job is not to save my students from cultural impoverishment. It is to teach them how to express themselves effectively in writing. The development of cogent, clear prose is at the heart of freshman composition. For too long, I have deluded myself into thinking that my job in a composition course was to introduce students to a rich academic topic, make them read difficult texts, make up for years of barely-more-than-functional literacy and book aversion, teach them to be critical thinkers, and help them understand the oppressive structures of late capitalism — all while helping them write focused arguments, revise, polish paragraphs, and edit sentences. Should college students be expected to read difficult texts? Sure. Should students develop a love of reading? Absolutely. Should students learn to express their views and persuade others in cogent, clear prose? Without question. But that last one is the only unique provenance of a composition course.

So as much as I want to teach my students to love justice, be passionate about politics, and think deeply about the future of humanity, they are not legitimate outcomes of a writing course. Neither are fostering a fetishistic love of the writing process or trying to

teach "critical reading of difficult texts."

My guess is that by the end of the semester, my students will hate my course because it is "boring," "hard," and "a lot of work." They probably won't have life-changing epiphanies about oppressive political structures. And I won't swear to make them read esoteric academic articles. But if they show up, do the work, and turn off their phones, they just might leave my class able to write a sentence.

Joseph R. Teller is a professor of English at the College of the Sequoias.

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