

Teaching Statement

On the first day of class I tell my students that one of the most important tools of the writer and reader is a sense of empathy—the ability to understand the feelings of someone else. I feel that empathy is also a crucial tool for successful teaching. By attempting to understand the whole student, an individual with complex layers of anxiety and hope and apathy and desire, I find that I become a more responsive and responsible teacher, and that my teaching becomes increasingly effective.

Very few of my students are English majors. Often they come to class with little or no confidence in their writing abilities. Many have a fear of the blank page; many dread having to think in deliberately and carefully. To get past these emotional impasses I try to plunge the students into writing as quickly as possible, to get them doing things they've never before done in a classroom. Every class day I lead them in practice writing exercises designed to engage their critical and imaginative thinking and to break down their resistance to writing. I try to keep the students constantly writing and constantly thinking, constantly trying to see the world from multiple perspectives.

At the same time, I try to encourage the students to trust their own intellectual resources. While, sadly, few students seem to spend time in deep recreational reading, I have found that most, though their secondary educations and their participation in the popular culture, have enough experience to tell the difference between good writing and bad writing. I work towards getting the students to recognize and apply this experience to their own writing—a difficult task, sometimes, but valuable when students gain insight into the processes of reading, writing, and critical thinking.

I find my teaching to be most effective when it is most transparent, and I work toward transparency in several ways: through a lengthy syllabus workshop on the first class day, through the grading exercise early in the semester, through wide-ranging oral commentaries on and explanations of each assigned writing project, and by detailed written comments on graded papers. I try to make what we're doing in class clear to the students—what they're doing, what I'm doing, and how our actions combine to make a unified whole.

I also make extensive use of student feedback. This aids in my goal of transparency, but does more: by taking seriously the opinions and feelings of the students, I validate them as class participants and share with them a sense of ownership in what we do. On the first day of class I have the students write out their goals for the semester, and on the last day I have them give written advice to my future students. Two or three times a semester I seek anonymous written feedback from the students; sometimes the students are harsh in their assessment of the class, sometimes gratifyingly supportive, and very often they offer solid suggestions for improving the class. About every other week I ask students to submit written questions—about the coursework, or about anything—and I have found this to be an outstanding method for generating classroom discussion and for encouraging otherwise silent students to participate.

Another form of feedback I have found useful is the official end-of-semester student evaluation. Mine are generally pretty good (historically ranging from 4.49 to 4.89 on a scale of 0 to 5), but after my second semester of teaching I noticed that several students had given me low marks for the statement “The exams/projects were presented and graded fairly.” These low marks troubled me, and after some thought I developed a grading exercise that instructs the students on my grading practices, lets them know in detail what I will be looking for in their own writing, and gives them additional experience in the critical evaluation of writing.

On the whole my students have done very well. Not only am I able to discern overall improvements in their abilities to write and think, individual students have gone on to win awards, to publish short fiction and essays, attend prestigious summer writing workshops, and enroll in MFA programs. Not all have succeeded, of course, but students with a desire to write and think and learn gain from my instruction.

I tend to smile at students who try to dodge responsibility for their writing by claiming that they are not good at English, or that they are not talented writers, for I do not believe that reading and writing are based on “talent,” on mysterious accidents of nature, or on gifts of generous muses. Rather I see reading and writing as skills that can be taught and learned. All my teaching is based on this perspective, a perspective that places the responsibility for success or failure on the individual student. But it is also an extraordinarily liberating perspective, I think, for in a talent-free classroom students can shake off their inhibitions and face what I see as an important truth: that with desire and hard work, *anyone* can write a competent essay or short story or poem. The skills of reading and writing are there for anybody to use and to learn. Once they are learned—owned, as it were—they become the personal possessions of the learner. I have many times in my life experienced the transformative power of literature. Though this power is not directly transferable from me to the students, I think it is my responsibility as a teacher to help my students achieve transformation, if they want it, to give them the opportunity to learn these skills, to use these tools, to open their lives to literature and to change. Words have power. Words change lives. And I am in the word business.