Teaching Writing Well

When I began my teaching career at Santa Clara University in 1985, I dutifully used the required composition text, but I became increasingly frustrated with it as I tried to translate its codified approach to the teaching of writing into meaningful lessons for my students. Too often I disagreed with its assertions about the fixed rules of writing; many professional writers violated their "rules" and I realized that in my own writing I did not practice them unfailingly. Since then I have left SCU and discovered more companionable writing texts to work with (e.g., those of Peter Elbow and Ken Macroirie). However, this change of texts reflected a deeper move away from a textbook-centered approach to the teaching of writing to one based upon a conviction that a balance between engaging subjects and engaged writers encourages the best writing, and that students should be encouraged more to engage their own subjects. As my choice of writing texts has changed, my role as a teacher has evolved into that of a mentor—at best—or a sympathetic yet rigorous reader—at least. While I am committed to teaching the conventions of academic discourse to my students, I realize my highest purpose is to draw forth from them the best they are capable of as writers and thinkers, and hopefully as human beings.

In my attempts to draw students forth, I have designed writing courses around subjects ranging from the Holocaust to El Salvador, censorship to sexuality, criminal justice to drug addiction, the environment to world hunger, and lately field research on the UCSC campus itself. I have taught what I would like to learn about, yet my choice of subjects has a more important aim than self-education. Despite the claims of critics like Maxine Hairston, I believe "politically charged" subjects should not only concern all of us, but that they also provide appropriate opportunities for students to discover how and what they think. By studying them and writing about them, I believe those ethical dimensions that writing helps illuminate will become more apparent to both my students and myself. In other words, the intellectual and moral weight of these subjects can inspire both compelling writing and, at times, thoughtful action. The practical result lies in the truism that writers engaged in their subjects often become better writers. But I do not rely exclusively on the moral weight of a subject to motivate my students to become better writers.

In addition to choosing engaging subjects, I believe students should be encouraged to choose their own subjects to explore and research. Given this opportunity, many of my students have created impressive examples of committed student writing. This does not suggest, however, giving students license to ignore the valuable lessons that can be learned from other writers or
researchers; we consider the qualities that characterize the best of both. But neither does this approach rely on the exclusive use of prose or research models to "teach" students how they should write an essay or conduct their research. It may seem simplistic to suppose that students become more motivated when they realize how valid their own choices of subject and, to a lesser extent, form are, but my teaching depends on this premise as both practice and purpose.

My challenge continues to be to balance this purpose with the more frequent if less personable concerns of the academic writing expected of university students. My practice is to begin with the more personal writing voice(s) of my students to explore the subjects we study; typically, we move toward more explicitly analytical modes of discourse during the quarter, culminating in an extended research paper. During this process, we carefully consider the stylistic and formal options available to a writer in exploring a subject. In other words, the sometimes arbitrary distinctions drawn by the more traditional "guides" between modes of discourse become opportunities to consider how the student/writer can channel the power of a personal voice into the thoughtful if more restrained analysis of complex subjects. While this can be a frustrating and erratic process for the writer, most of my students eventually discover they can write effectively and persuasively about difficult issues with a mature and authentic voice not necessarily divorced from their personal experience. As mentioned above, when this goal is achieved, my students have submitted portfolios at the end of a quarter containing convincing evidence of thoughtful writing and research.

More practically, to encourage my students in their evolution as writers, I use peer response groups extensively. In the Porter Core course, where I work with students who have not yet passed the University's entrance exam, I participate in all meetings of these small groups of four to five, working closely with students on drafts of their essays. In Writing 2 sections, after my initial participation, students eventually work together in peer groups without my constant presence. This is intended to encourage both honesty and independence among them, in both their critical responses and in their own writing. All of these mechanisms are aimed at offering my students thorough feedback on the content and the quality of their writing. In fact, in the last few years, I have become even more concerned with identifying and eliminating sentence-level problems in my students' writing. My work with writers-at-risk in Subject A sections of the Porter Core course has underscored the need for a more rigorous approach to these problems. In all my classes I utilize a writing text that can help a student isolate and correct problems with grammar; I have also designed exercises to enhance their writing style. As a lover of poetry and lyrical prose, I encourage my students to value how they write as well as what they write about.
Although this practice can foster a sense of responsibility in students, I would not be a responsible teacher unless I hoped, also, to foster a serious concern for the ethical or moral dimensions that written expression can illuminate. Returning to my earlier aside about how thoughtful action can be engendered by thoughtful writing, I want to be candid about my desire to be more than a writing teacher for my students. I don't aspire to be a moralist, nor have I any special insight into how effective writing can lead to effective action. Thus, while I disagree with Hairtson's position on subject matter, I embrace her dictum that "we teach not to give students our truths but to make it possible for them to discover their own."2 But as the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has argued, education is never neutral; it confronts the teacher with ethical choices, however unconscious our pedagogy. Therefore, I often require that my students become involved in projects that not only remove them from the University environment physically, but also confront them with the issues and realities about which they write.

For example, in one composition and rhetoric class at Santa Clara University, my students were required to work in community programs in the hopes of deepening our understanding of the social problems that we were studying. I repeated this experiment here at UCSC, with encouraging intersections of writing and action; the compassion my students displayed was often inspiring. My work with Friends Outside, in turn, inspired the design of a writing course in which I studied the criminal justice system with my students. In addition to visits from a sheriff's officer who managed the county jail, the director of Friends Outside and a former prison inmate, we toured Soledad State Prison in an attempt to more fully appreciate the effects of incarceration. This field research complemented the more conventional forms of research employed in their writing.

In the past, my students have been involved in environmental action projects, which confronted them with questions about what they could do to alleviate the problems they identified. These same students performed skits for an elementary school, which highlighted the environmental problems we had been discussing, and writing about. Thus, my students became teachers, and compelling ones at that. Certainly, when they write with depth and commitment about issues and ideas that engage them, as in the old rabbinical adage, "Our students are among our best teachers." Continuing this purposeful attempt to connect writing and action, I co-taught a Writing 1 course with Nick Royal, former Director of the Merrill Field Program. We required our students to volunteer with a local school or community agency as a means of both broadening their understanding of Santa Cruz, and informing their writing and research.

As committed as I am to enlarging the writing "classroom" for my students, I have eventually developed a course that addresses an intriguing and complex
relationship between writing and the writer: Writing & Well-Being. Simply put, its premise is that writing can enhance one's well-being. My research into this subject culminated in a paper articulating my practice of this theory at a past CCCC Convention. The course begins with the assumption that by writing about and studying problems that trouble either an individual or a group (and often both), student writers can enhance their own well-being while struggling to better understand these problems. More specifically, students have written powerful and enlightening research papers on eating disorders, teen-age suicide, drug addiction, child molestation, sexuality, and alcoholism to name a few. In these cases, the writer usually has a personal stake in understanding and sometimes coming to terms emotionally with the subject. However, as I’ve mentioned before, I allow my students considerable latitude in choosing topics and no one is ever compelled to confront a subject too uncomfortable to write about. The point is to provide students the opportunity to explore subjects which may have caused (or continue to cause) them considerable suffering; for those who accept this challenge, the results are often therapeutic. I am aware of the risks involved in this sort of course; I am not a trained therapist. But the course is flexible enough to provide even the most reticent students the option to explore subjects that do not compel them to take emotional risks they do not choose to take.

In the spring quarter I teach a course that evolved from a focus on children’s literature to one that now studies creativity in children and adults. Entitled “The Creative Spirit,” we attempt to practice creativity in our writing and in various class projects. This spring we plan to collaborate with a local elementary school class in designing and executing a mosaic mural for their school. I am convinced that these experiences can provide not only valuable subject matter for writing, but can also illuminate the relationship between thought and action. I don't want my students writing in an intellectual vacuum; while I value the formal research I require of them, I try to balance it with field research as well. Last spring, I taught a new course, “The Unnatural History of UC Santa Cruz,” in order to explore the value of field research as a primary tool in a writing course. Although not every writing course lends itself to this approach, my students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to work outside the classroom. My most memorable experiences as a teacher have been at the intersection of writing and the experiences of life.

It’s no accident that the word choice appears often in my statement of purpose; since so much about our education is compulsory, I am glad to offer my students the wide range of choices I am convinced can contribute to the best student writing. My goal is to provide students with practical guidance in writing well about subjects that confound our best efforts to act with enlightened purpose in our lives.