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Since the 1980’s, I have taught writing classes for the Humanities Division at UC Santa Cruz. Eventually I was assigned to Crown College and for over twenty years I have been associated with the Core Course at Crown College. Every year I have taught Writing 1, the basic composition course. For about fifteen years I have been a regular instructor in the Writing 20 and 21 series of classes, for students who have not met the writing requirement at UC, now the ELWR. I would like to continue as an instructor for the Writing Program at UC Santa Cruz. In addition, I would like to be considered for a merit increase.

Most of what I know about teaching writing I have learned while teaching at UCSC. My colleagues and my students have been my best instructors. They have taught me to look carefully at what the individual writer needs. They have taught me to consider writing essential not only to success in study and in work but as the foundation for democracy itself and as the route to power for many students in their personal lives and in their working lives. This route to power is especially significant for the students that I tend to teach. My students have most often been under-prepared students who have been challenged by writing, people who have not satisfied the writing requirement before arriving on campus. Often they have significant language challenges, multiple dialects, other significant language interferences.

With the help of my colleagues in the program, I have tried to find strategies and specific techniques for addressing the needs of the students in my classes. My theoretical development began with my own undergraduate studies in English and in linguistics and transformational grammar. In those classes, we looked at the role of language communities as presented by Cazden. I had good teachers.

After undergraduate study, I continued to read. My approach to composition theory seemed to be sharpened and made comprehensible by learning about the error analysis of Mina Shaughnessy and the generative grammar of Francis Christiansen. My education continued by considering the writer-centered theories, the dynamics of the student focus in teaching, the significance of cultural contexts, the importance of situated rhetoric and the nature of argument. Each year I continue to read in the history and theory of Rhetoric.

My courses in writing emphasize the purposes of the writer, the value of the writer’s voice and independence, and the needs of the reader for consistent grammar and conventional stability. It is a challenge to navigate the need for stable conventions in a world that is relatively destabilized for many of these
students. But they seem to be quite successful in the overall. With writing groups and peer response, with the careful advice on revision by the writing assistant and by me, with diverse readings and examples, with assignments that build upon each other and with my own determination to be responsive, my students have usually been well-served by these classes.

I am fortunate to be teaching in a program that values the diversity of the students and of the instructors. I am different in some ways from other instructors in the program. It is a circumstance developed by my own experience and it is shaped by my personality. I recall reading a book on teaching people to read and it said on the first page that there were a hundred ways to do it and all of them work. I suppose it is too much to hope that they are all equally admirable or humane. Nevertheless, I have an abiding faith in the value of diversity in approaches to teaching.

The courses that are reflected in the syllabi in this review binder demonstrate an approach that seems to work for me. This approach is based on my own struggles as a writer, my failures in writing and my successes, my sense that, when I was a student, much of the writing process was overly mystified by my instructors. They thought either that writing was a rarely achieved standard, a formula, or that it was simply a vague paying attention to your inner voices. For me, writing academic prose is a highly structured and socially determined construction. It is powerful because of what you choose to say and what you choose to leave out. It is the foundation for our community and the best tactic for solving conflict. I have a class handout that speaks about persuasion and community being the same thing, an idea from James White. For me rhetoric and writing are the keys to making sense of the world and to acting purposefully.

In my classes, I emphasize purposeful writing. I focus rather strenuously on the types of writing that serve academic purposes and teach students that they are in a unique circumstance when they write for academic projects, in every discipline, and later for occupational projects. I teach students to see the organization of writing as an outcome of their thinking strategies, that comparison is not a way of structuring an essay but a way of thinking, if you will. I address grammar and rhetoric directly and explicitly. I leave very little of the conventional expectations to the imagination. I want to make these rules more comprehensible and I want to help students to understand and perhaps to control these conventions that so often seem to defeat them.

It should be noted that my classes have a tendency to reflect the needs of my students to attain an acceptable level of competency in academic writing, demanded by our placement exams and other measures. But I have never been content with competence as an ultimate goal. I have always been determined to seek excellence in student writing. It seems important to emphasize that students
are themselves not satisfied with competence—no one wants to have “S/he was competent” engraved on their tombstone. They want to be good at these things. Some of them have been convinced that they are not ever going to attain a level beyond competence, if that. But this is not true. It is a lie that depends on the conservative view that writing excellence is a stable notion that belongs to certain dialects. I teach the conventions of writing, the rules and the lineaments of style, as if they were always changing and that their own skill should endeavor to be conscious and to control the polite conventions and the accepted notions of written language, the grammars that we must own.

As a veteran writing teacher, it seems important to add that I am not, I hope, stuck in the pedagogies of past. I have been fortunate to be educated as a teacher during an immensely rich period in the development of writing pedagogy. Undoubtedly the foment in the theory has been largely due to open admissions, to a democratizing impulse in the university as well as to philosophical speculations in the last decades. In our program we have had the benefit of continuous active interest in the refinements of writing pedagogy.

In my syllabi, especially in my day-by-day records of Writing 1 and Core, and in my handouts, I think you will see the types of material I try to bring to students. I want them to begin to grasp the extraordinary adjustment that it takes to become the reader, the thinker, the writer, and the social actor they have to be.

In my classes I take slightly different approaches to the material because the courses have different demands and different positions in the development of the student. The core course has its extraordinary mix of material. Its emphasis is on writing and other expressive skills. But it presents complex content as well. My sections have a special focus on the satisfaction of the English Language Writing Requirement (ELWR). It is my goal to help the students begin to become conscious of their ability to control texts, to analyze, and to use the ideas in the community to help develop their ideas. At the same time, I want to bring them out of isolation as a writer and thinker. I want them to become colleagues for other students and for me. We are part of the same endeavor, the creation of knowledge to improve the general community.

In Writing 20, I follow up with the students who did not make sufficient progress with the ELWR in the Core course. In this course, I am focused on individual students and what they need. In all of my courses, I meet every student at least two times. In Writing 20 this commitment increases. I need to be there for them to make the kind of progress they have to make. These meetings may look carefully at the way that verbs are used in a sentence or the meetings may address the problems of thinking clearly and expressing ideas in an orderly way. I have spent time teaching students to read and I have spent time trying to get them to organize their work. The course, it should be noted, requires the students
to read a long book as well as an anthology of essays. I have tried to choose books that students love to read. I want them to have the experience of finishing a book, enjoying it, and controlling the material in it.

The Writing 20 course also tries to create a strong sense of community in the classroom. Success in writing, in my view, depends on the students becoming resources for each other. They need to see themselves in a new light, not as passive receivers of some kind of static information but as part of the process of teaching and of creating the rules and the possibilities for writing itself. I have always pushed members of this class to strive to be writing assistants. I want them to revolutionize their view of their involvement in the writing community.

In Writing 1, I seek excellence. I do not hesitate to make sure that students have the skills that show their competence. Not everyone comes into Writing 1 with solid skill in academic writing. But I do not hesitate to tell them that I want them to become sophisticated writers. The writing 1 class is focused on violence and the community. It is a course that has attracted many students and has fostered an enthusiastic atmosphere in the classroom.

I do not make violence and related topics the only material in the class. I have always divided the class roughly in half, between attention to the violence theme and attention to other themes and other types of writing. I use an anthology. I chose it because it has a variety of topics and a variety of viewpoints and values. I look for an anthology that includes student writing and that has essays with citations. I want students to see examples of the kind of writing they are expected to do.

Everyday in class, Writing 1 students help each other, read each other, and work with each other on projects. I require peer-advising sessions on drafts and on completed essays. I ask them to do a group project and to do joint assignments of other kinds. The goal of this class is to make students resourceful enough to help themselves and each other when they need it.

I need to say something about responding to student writing. The crucial act of a writing teacher is responding to student writing in a helpful and constructive way. The essence of paper reading and marking is to discover what the purposes of the writer might be and to make them work on strategies to make their point more effectively. I do this by being the best reader I can, an inquisitive and a demanding listener, but never, I hope, thoughtless or destructive of their confidence. I need to look for their best performances. I need to show them that I see what they do well and to encourage them to keep doing it.
I have many students with severe writing problems, often in grammar and the conventional use of English. I am not, in my view, overly directive in correcting errors in usage, in grammar, in spelling, or in syntax. But I try to see everything. I do make generous marks on essays and I indicate where changes need to be made. I want to see every ineffective step improved. But I do not proofread students’ essays. I don’t give them the words to express themselves. I show them where I see a problem and wait for them to address it. I give them examples of the types of errors that they make and the kind of changes they need to make. I will show them alternatives for some exemplary errors. But their writing must be in their own words, or it is pointless.

Students will make great efforts to improve the fluency of their writing if they want to be a writer, if they want to be heard. If I am listening, then they will eventually try to make themselves clear to me. They will want to make the writing work fluently. They need to acquire faith in what they have to say and the value of them saying it. I have to be, first of all, their best reader, the person that they want to convince or to show. When they believe in the need for their own writing, then they will take the time and expend the effort to scrupulously make their writing more precise in the mechanical and the grammatical ways.

I am thankful that the Writing Program has helped me to develop as a teacher in so many ways. It has helped me to become an informed professional. I see the university as a resource for the community, especially a public university like ours. I want to give my students the foundation for success in their academic career and later. I am involved in the community. I want my students to be involved. I want to introduce them to how to become political and social actors and to make a difference for our community as well as for themselves.

The best comment on writing that I ever had from a student might have been from the young man who didn’t know whether he had passed the Subject A—now the ELWR—exam. When I asked him how the test went, he told me “When I left the hall, I felt like a writer.” When we get the job right, it turns out like that.