Approaching the As-Yet-Unknown: Supporting Student Autonomy in the Composition Classroom

Most of the choices I’ve made as a teacher—from the tone I set in the classroom, to the course readings, to the sequence of assignments, even to the way I think about students and interact with them one-on-one—have been aimed at supporting the autonomy of the students in my classes. I try to let them talk more than I do, to respect every contribution from every student, to respond to their writing in a way that shows that I want to hear what they have to say, and to value the knowledge and skills they arrive with. In order to meet the university’s high standards for effective writing, critical reading, and complex thinking, in my view, students must develop their ability to be independent thinkers and self-guided, self-motivated learners. To help them achieve this independence, I build three main elements into the structure of the courses I teach: a focus on developing the skill of asking difficult questions, an assignment sequence that helps them think critically about the choices they make in shaping the texts they write, and the use of writing groups, which provide a way of involving students in the assessment of their own and their peers’ writing. These elements support the autonomy of students by helping them to think independently about writing and to develop their own writing-sense.

On a basic level, I believe that understanding the importance of asking questions can demystify for students how others “know” things in academia, which is why I make the asking of questions central to all of the writing and discussing we do in the classes I teach. I remember as a new college student thinking on some unspoken level that the knowledge professors had and taught to us students was absolute, that it must have been handed down somehow about each subject and text, that the professors had found it written in dictionary-like reference books, or had been taught it by their own professors. After my first year, I started to understand that knowledge is *created* by scholars and that the creation of knowledge begins with the asking of questions. This realization demystified for me what exactly was going on in academia. It seems to me that understanding what inquiry is and why it matters is the key that lets students in the door of the university,
really lets them in though they may have been physically here already for some time. So I try to help my students discover this—that asking is more important than (or is, at least, the seed of) knowing, that asking questions is at the heart of academic work and perhaps of all discovery.

I consider one of my primary responsibilities to be to help students learn how to effectively ask questions, ones that will lead somewhere; the other skills that define a sophisticated, independent thinker and writer build upon this one. In all of my courses and in Writing 2 especially, I introduce early on Ramage, Bean, and Johnson’s idea of “problematizing”: searching out questions that don’t have easy answers, embracing their complexity and living with them for awhile, allowing them to remain open. Throughout the quarter I return to problematizing as a tool students can use to make texts and assignments their own, helping them to discover that posing complex questions is the key to engaging fully with intellectual work and to producing worthwhile intellectual products. I often ask students to develop lists of problematic questions about our texts individually or in groups, and many of our discussions grow out of these questions. I ask them to write their best questions on the board, then invite discussion about the questions themselves in order to suggest ways of deepening them before we begin to answer them. I also model inquiry by sharing with them questions that I’ve developed. In Writing 2, the quarter-long research project is built upon a series of questions the students develop about the memoirs they’ve independently chosen. My goal overall is to support them in developing the habit of asking hard questions and to help them hone their understanding of the different kinds of questions one can ask and the varied directions questions can lead. By developing the skill of effective inquiry, students also develop their ability to create knowledge, to engage in academic discourse, to think independently.

I’ve explored various approaches to creating a sequence of assignments that will support students in developing their autonomy. In looking over the course materials I’ve created, I can see that my implementation of my teaching philosophy as evidenced in those materials has become more defined and purposeful over the past few years. In my current Writing 2 course, “Telling Our Stories: Autobiography as a Radical Act,” for example, I designed the progression of assignments to help students break free of formulaic structures and to think independently about how to write a focused, organized, developed,
and supported essay in an effective style. I begin with two assignments (the first a personal narrative, the second an analytical response) that push students to take two big steps towards developing their own writing-sense: to focus their writing without thesis statements and to create structures that suit the ideas they’re trying to convey. With the third and fourth essay assignments, we return to thesis-driven analytical writing with fresh eyes, ready to think critically about how and why we make the moves in academic writing that are likely familiar to students already, and how we can use those moves in sophisticated ways. The final assignment asks students to write a memoir and an accompanying analysis articulating the choices they made and how those choices represent their critical reflection on the problematic questions central to the course. The goal of this assignment sequence is empowerment: to clarify how academic writing works, to give the students portable tools, to encourage them to develop their own writing instincts, to help them build an understanding of good writing as a broad spectrum with room for many voices and many styles rather than as something rigid and exclusive, to help them make writing their own, and to increase their academic self-efficacy. When students are empowered in these ways, they become more independent as thinkers and writers.

Over the past three years, I have made considerable progress in creating an autonomy-supportive course through the use of Writing Groups, a model I picked up from the Porter Core course and have tailored to Writing 2 and Writing 20. We meet in the whole-class seminar once a week where we discuss writing techniques and the week’s assigned readings, and in Writing Groups of five for the second meeting of the week, where we give feedback as a group on each student’s essay. In the beginning of each quarter, I do much facilitating of the process in these small groups; I ask specific questions to keep the discussion focused on the areas of each student’s paper that need the most attention. As the quarter progresses, students are able to give productive feedback to each other with less guidance from me, often noticing and pointing out on their own what I would have pointed out. (One result seems to be that they come to value each other’s feedback more. A particularly gratifying comment on a student evaluation: “LOVED writing groups—very valuable peer feedback and conversations were helpful instead of half-assed peer review comments from a quick read-through in class.” So often in the past, students have complained that peer feedback is a “waste of time.”) In this setting, not only do I see their
writing improve, I watch the students’ ability to independently identify and discuss what makes good writing grow. The students’ ability to talk effectively about writing has far reaching implications: they develop a writing schema, becoming more aware of how writing works (and when it doesn’t) in their own papers, in their peers’ papers, and in the texts we read for seminar. Writing Groups also increase our ability to discuss the students’ papers using the same terms we use in discussing seminar texts. Participating in the groups demystifies the feedback they receive: students see how the feedback I give them is based on the same criteria they themselves are using to talk about their peers’ writing and about the seminar texts. And because they are present for the assessment, they can ask for clarification and elaboration when they need it. On the whole, using Writing Groups allows me to better achieve my goal of making the course a safe and fertile place for students to take charge of their own learning.

One challenge that arises from my focus on creating an autonomy-supportive classroom is that some students indicate on their course evaluations that they’d like to have spent more time on citation and grammar. I recognize the importance of teaching conventions and correctness: even though I want students to focus on larger issues first, there's the great danger that when writers don’t employ conventions or achieve correctness, readers may pay little attention to a text’s ideas. This area presents a challenge for me pedagogically, as I haven't yet been able to fully reconcile my goal of pushing students to forget rules and develop their own writing-sense with the teaching of conventions and correctness, which I’ve always viewed as rule-driven. I have begun to explore ways of teaching correctness that are in keeping with my object of helping each student develop her/his independent writing-sense, and I will continue to pursue this goal.

My pedagogical goals contribute to courses that, when students fully engage with them, can be uncomfortable, asking students to go beyond their comfort zones, to reckon with their notions of what makes good writing and good thinking, to reckon with their own ideas and beliefs. I feel that my responsibility as a teacher is to design my courses to both push and support students through the discomfort inherent to the process of asking difficult questions, to push and support them through the process of developing their independence—a process that requires students to let go of preconceived notions in order to pursue the as-yet-unknown that’s at the heart of real thinking and writing.