

On the first day of each semester, I ask the students what they hope to accomplish from taking our class. Some of the answers are rather straight-forward while others are indicative of larger goals that the students have. I want to help prepare them to reach the academic, professional, and personal goals that they set for themselves. To do this, I root my teaching in three tenets: communication, context, and collaboration.

My desire to help people learn to communicate better with one another is what brought me from business management to teaching English composition, and I still hold it as the most important aspect of my class. If I am able to teach students to clearly compose and communicate their ideas, then they will be ahead of many of their peers when they reach upper-division coursework or the workplace. Communicating their own ideas is important, but I also teach them to interpret and critically analyze the messages that are sent by others. As students become more informed participants in the dialogue of communication, they are better able to meet the goals that they set forth at the beginning of the class.

As with successfully engaging in communication, acknowledging and adapting to context can help students become better prepared for the expectations beyond my classroom. I stress the importance of considering the audience, the setting, the message, and the author before analyzing or creating any text. Without properly considering the context, a student could easily suffer a misstep while composing leading to miscommunication.

In my classroom, I use collaboration as a way to help students grapple with the difficulties of communicating within a given context while allowing them to develop personal responsibility in an academic setting. Students work together to complete in-class activities, present information from the assigned readings, and perform collaborative writing projects. The personal importance for this tenet is certainly based in my business background, but I have seen time and again that employers and upper-division instructors are asking students to complete collaborative tasks. If they are going to be expected to write collaboratively, then it seems reasonable that they should learn to do so in a composition class.

To reinforce my student-based approach to teaching, it is important to reinforce the student agency in creating and revising texts. To help students see where they can improve their grasp of communication skills and contextual concerns, I embrace a modified-portfolio system for grading. Students are presented with the assignment sheet and rubric and are asked to submit a draft that will be given comments and a “phantom grade” that does not count toward their overall course grade but instead gives the student a better understanding of my expectations. By putting the onus on the student to revise and resubmit by the date the portfolio is due, the students get to choose how much my class will be able to help them toward reaching their goals.

As I develop as an instructor, I will keep my students’ goals at the center of my teaching. My three major tenets may shift as I embrace new paradigms in the field, but my ultimate test before incorporating something into my teaching will be to ask “Does this benefit the students as they strive to meet their goals?” If the answer is yes, then I must consider it.

Influential Works

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- Lunsford, Andrea and Lisa Ede. *Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. Print.
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