Syllabus Rationale and Teaching Philosophy

In assisting students' foray into the academic conversation, I side with Horning and Kramer's statement in *Reconnecting Reading and Writing*. They write: "Our goal should be to prepare basic writers for the more advanced writing they will be required to do during the remainder of college, and, more importantly, for the professional writing they may be required to do once they earn their degree and become a member of the post-college workforce" (Horning, Kramer 104-105). I am strongly of the opinion that my role is to initiate students to the world of academic writing with the knowledge that a first year writing (FYW) course is a single step of many they need to take to become better writers. Because I am mindful of the extended process students are just beginning in FYW, and that I can only do so much on my own, I heed Lisa Delpitt's admonition to expose students to a wide variety of materials" (Delpitt 549) in hopes that exposure will both inspire and teach new perspectives.

One of the most important aspects of a FYW course, in addition to developing writing skills, is developing critical thinking skills. Students develop critical thinking skills by reading texts from multiple perspectives, challenging their own ways of thinking, and by having group discussions wherein students share ideas. Deep immersion works for learning foreign languages and, since for many students academia is akin to a foreign language, I try to simulate the immersion process in my classroom. Students are expected to engage, grapple, wrestle, and challenge texts I've selected as well as with their own work. I promote an ideology that all views may and should be challenged. I quote my grandfather who used to say, "No matter how flat the pancake, there's always two sides."

My indoctrination into academia occurred in my freshman year of college when I auditioned for a small creative writing class and was selected. That's where I saw myself as a real student and a real writer. That's when my voice began to take shape. Outside of the larger classroom, I felt more comfortable sharing my voice and openly struggling and grappling with texts. I know that I work better in small groups and, as a result, I privilege small group work in my classes. After most lessons, I split the class into small groups of three or four to freely discuss the topic amongst themselves. A student who is offered the time and space to practice articulating their thoughts with no consequences (no fear of a bad grade) is working towards being able to articulate those thoughts onto paper.

For me, a writer and teacher who is constantly learning, it is important for students to know that writing is rarely easy for anyone. I remind students that even professional writers have trouble starting or concluding. Accordingly, professional writers follow strict regimens in their lives to allow time for writing. As many FYW students have yet to develop the discipline to craft writing over time, in small manageable amounts, and allow time for revision, I build small assignments, peer review, and allot time for revision into my syllabus. With peer review, I hope to promote the idea that writing (or parts thereof) is and should be collaborative. Further, I coach students to learn that editing is not the end of the writing process but *part* of the writing process and I aim to "build quality of failure" into the curriculum "to allow students to examine their missteps for what they can change about them" (Adler-Kassner 63). This is why I have chosen to assign a final Portfolio where the students have an opportunity to revise their three essays and write an introduction letter reflecting on their work in the class.

Because I love writing and I believe that developing writing skills is fundamental to the development of self-expression, I sincerely aim to make my class fun. A statement that resonates with me from Gerald Graff's "The Problem Problem and Other Oddities of Academic

Discourse" is his note of students' response to "the problem problem." He writes, "Whenever I have polled students on the question, many say they have a problem with academia's tendency to turn everything it touches into grist for the analytic mill, almost as if there were a deliberate attempt to spoil everybody's fun" (Graff 28). While I am in favor of examining a text from multiple angles, it is never my desire to make textual analysis seem pro forma. We do not examine a text for the sake of it. We examine a text or construct an argument for a purpose that has been clearly stated beforehand. With a goal in mind, be it to win an argument or to ascertain an element of the rhetorical situation, students are better able to mine a text than if they are asked to "mill" over it for no apparent reason.

 I am mindful of FYW students' limitations in preparing my syllabus and in my expectations of them. I found Dana Ferris' approach to facilitating better writing worthy of adopting. She lists several areas to prioritize. They include:

> 1. Give students time to do their best work. 2. Help students understand the importance of taking time to think, write, and revise. 3. Teach self-editing strategies, such as reading papers aloud, finding a proofreader, and looking for specific error types one at a time. 4. Hold students accountable for self-editing. 5. Provide expert feedback that focuses on each student's area of greatest need and calls it to their attention and which moves students toward increasing autonomy in self-editing. 6. Understand the limitations of in-class grammar instruction and prioritize self-editing strategies. (Ferris 4)

These provisions build in a format for students to practice the writing process (invention, revision, and collaboration) and set up a reasonable framework for instructors when developing their curriculum. Adhering to these principles, I attempt to create a syllabus that is not overwrought with busy work but, rather, includes scaffolded assignments that build towards a larger project. To that end, I leave open time for intermittent lessons on common errors I identify which have included simple grammar mistakes to lack of paragraph breaks to formatting an in-text citation in hope that students will be better prepared to self-edit.

 I take a "genre approach to college writing" (Clark, vii-ix). In order to facilitate transfer, students should understand the genres that they read, that they are expected to write, and understand that the genres which they may face in the future may be yet unfamiliar. Understanding that genres vary will allow students at least the basic awareness that the language required may shift and that language is not one-size-fits-all. As Mary Soliday writes in *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments across the Disciplines*:

> While [students] are immersed ... in the life of the social group that gives meaning to the practice, they surely benefit as well from explicitly discussing the rhetoric of genres … and [b]y building this context for genre, teachers can help students who would otherwise struggle or just would not find purpose in university writing to produce texts meaningful to both writer and reader. (Soliday 99)

 My awareness of my limitations in a single semester of FYW forces me to focus on which genres I believe students will benefit from the most. A benefit is not a short-term learned skill. It is one that transforms a student's way of thinking and practicing writing. In this respect, I focus on helping the students situate themselves as writers via a single narrative essay and then on developing their persuasive writing skills in two argumentative essays.

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