

“You cannot teach a person anything; you can only help him find it within himself.”

–Galileo Galilei

Writing is a foundation of knowledge-building, a way to explore and formalize what we experience in the world around us. In the English classroom, the written word remains the basis of expression. Providing students with the tools they need to become better readers, writers, and thinkers helps to empower, inspire, and inform a growing citizenry. To this end, my teaching philosophy is guided by the following ideas:

I want to inspire lifelong learners. Independent thinking is something I try to foster in the classroom; this process begins with curiosity and excitement, and builds outward. I structure my class as a learning community. Students learn to read and analyze text, responding to literature through in-class discussion and writing. Students also practice the art and craft of writing, enter into discussion with one another, and share their discoveries. In addition, meeting with students in-class and in conferences allows me to tailor learning to individual needs. This layered approach reaches beyond rote memorization and formula writing to something deeper: an appreciation of learning. The practice of reflection—à la the Deweyan educational model—also promotes lifelong learning and informs my teaching methodology. Reflection assignments allow students to discover and articulate what works and what doesn’t in their own thinking and writing processes. In doing so, they can identify weaknesses and make improvements. Research and reflection often begin with questions: *What do I want to know about “x”?* *Where can I find additional information on this topic?* *What did I learn?* *What could I have done better?* *What other topics interest me?* Likewise, lifelong learners continue to examine, explore, and ask themselves questions.

Student-centered classrooms are a key aspect of my pedagogy. Students are at the center of my lesson planning process. In a student-centered classroom, the roles of instructor and student move from mere lecturing and note-taking to mutual engagement, such that learning and understanding are promoted to an even higher level. My primary goal is to create an atmosphere that encourages participation and involvement. A secondary goal is to build community within the classroom through the use of in-class discussion, small group work, student blogs, and online discussion boards.

Collaboration enhances learning opportunities. Collaborative learning is another important part of community building in a student-centered classroom. In my classes, students work together on process-oriented writing assignments and in peer review workshops. In doing so, students form collegial relationships with one another and, as a result, are invested in the class and the learning process itself. There is a good deal of scholarship that explains the process and benefits of group work (Bruffee; Berthoff; Gere). Collaborative learning enhances productive interpersonal and professional relationships and can result in a deeper understanding of source material. Too often, text is considered fixed—a stable, complete and finished product. Through collaboration, multiple perspectives complicate and expand what might otherwise be a singular interpretation. What emerges is a layered, dynamic process with which students read, analyze, and create new text. In this way, scholarship becomes a more organic and dialogic process through which, as a community of writers, students can encourage each other and accomplish more.

I encourage risk-taking, experimentation, and student choice. In *Expect the Unexpected*, Donald Murray writes: “Students are most likely to write—especially those students who are least likely to write—when they confront a personal problem that might be solved by writing. Writing must have a purpose for us to take it seriously, and the universal purpose that writing may serve is our fundamental need to understand the world.” To facilitate this process, I encourage risk-taking and experimentation in my class. Students are assigned a number of essays over the semester, including one “radical revision.” Essay evaluation is delayed until the end of the course to allow students the freedom to revise and work at their own pace, while staying within due dates provided to them. Rough drafts receive constructive feedback from peer groups and from me, but are not graded. Final drafts receive a tentative grade, which may be improved with further revision. At the end of the semester students choose which essays to submit for grading in their Final Portfolio, one component of the final grade. For the students, these essays represent the quality, quantity, and range of work completed during the semester. Importantly, the students choose which work to include and whether or not to make further revisions.

Empowerment is tied to motivation. Student needs are important. Although most course topics and readings are scheduled, there will always be room to incorporate student interests. If students take ownership of the class, they will be more likely to contribute their time, attention, and effort. In a process-driven class, a significant attempt is more important than a perfunctory achievement. My students are rewarded for their efforts. To this end, students are evaluated a number of different ways: my own modified contract assessment, qualitative peer critique, and self-evaluation. Instructors and students must work together in the classroom; however, I believe that empowered and motivated students benefit when held accountable for their performance. My role as a teacher is to encourage individual students to do their best—to empower, inspire, and inform. I cannot imagine a better place for me to be.