

## Inspiring Confidence and Capacities: College Composition in an Anxious Age

Scholar Peter Elbow once remarked, “The common model of writing I grew up with preaches control...Yet almost always my main experience ends up one of not being in control, feeling stuck, feeling lost, trying to write something and never succeeding. Helplessness and passivity...” (32). Elbow’s discussion of his early notions surrounding writing can apply to the composition classroom as well as writing more broadly. For example, students come into English 101 with no college writing experience, and the genres explored in the course are often new to them. This unfamiliarity can breed numerous anxieties, from worries about their performance in the course (because everything is new) or perhaps more commonly, apathy and disinterest around participation because students fear they will be wrong or believe what they learn in composition will never be useful outside it. Additionally, writing is often a site where such anxieties surface. My course focuses on helping to alleviate those for students, so that writing becomes not a chore, but an enjoyable and exploratory experience. However, even more, and perhaps through this framework, I want my students to find their “voice” (writerly and otherwise) and feel confident in sharing that voice both inside and outside the classroom—in academic as well as public settings. To that end, two main goals I emphasize with my composition students are reducing writing anxiety and assisting them in finding their voices as individuals.

I emphasize writing as a process for students rather than have them think of papers as perfect, end products that they are supposed to create. In “Teaching Writing as a Process not a Product,” scholar Donald Murray writes, “Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness. We work with language in action...The writer uses language to reveal the truth to himself so that he can tell it to others. It is an exciting, eventful, evolving process” (4). As Murray emphasizes, writing can always be improved upon

and is never finished—this is a core belief that I share with my students. I put this into practice via a writing journal that students keep throughout the course. As they work on major composition assignments, the writing journal is a place where students can do some or all of the following: reflect on their editing and revising processes, journal about their feelings surrounding their writing and progress in class, track the amount of time they spend writing, etc. This practice helps students reframe the way they approach their own writing, as well as recognize how they are growing and what they are learning in my class. One obstacle that does emerge with an emphasis on process is methods of student evaluation both during and at the end of the semester. However, the writing journal assists in mapping students' progress, and I also utilize specific rubrics, detailed assignment prompts, and conferences as well, so that students fully understand my expectations as an instructor.

Understanding my expectations and conceptualizing writing as a process frees students from anxieties that may hold them back from writing or cause them to dislike it—this helps students discover their own writing voices. Academic Howard Tinberg asks a powerful question that correlates with this goal. He remarks, “But what if we imagined a set of outcomes less bound to the number of pages written or genres attempted but instead aimed at promoting a habit of mind or, more to the point, asking students to theorize about habits of mind that will help them articulate and apply concepts critical to becoming successful writers?” (17). So, in short, in my course I emphasize students' “habits of mind” when it comes not only to their writing in composition, but also to their understanding of how the knowledge they gain in my class expands beyond it. In addition to the writing journal, I ask students to do reflections on their peer reviews, as well as on their major assignments. Encouraging students' abilities in metacognition develops personal reflexivity. Moreover, it also aids in their professional and personal development, as

they consider how their work in composition extends outside the classroom to their careers and personal lives. One way in particular that these objectives unfold is through my course's final public-facing assignment.

For the assignment, students create a project that examines a social issue using some form of new media, whether that be a podcast, a PowerPoint, a TikTok series, or a webpage. Before their final project, students complete a genre analysis (which enables them to understand how genres work for specific audiences and purposes) and a personal narrative (which connects a personal experience students have to a chosen social issue). As a result of scaffolding these rhetorical skills, the students' past projects enable them to have a clear understanding of the audiences they want to reach with their final assignment (i.e. a TikTok series might be useful to engage other college students about a housing problem on their campus, while a podcast would be a stronger format for a project focused on an environmental concern like beach erosion). This project is applicable outside the composition classroom, not only as students become professionals who utilize and engage with multiple forms of media post-graduation but also as they become informed citizens who can discuss current social issues. Ultimately, with the public-facing assignment and the incorporation of new media throughout my course, I most want students to gain what literary scholar Sidonie Smith describes as "capacities." Smith's focus on capacities rather than skills emphasizes student competencies as things to be continually expanded, not as items to be possessed. When thinking about student learning, such an orientation is key, as capacity building both highlights new media's place in a dynamic, evolving composition landscape and emphasizes the value of student investment in their educational experiences.

While I cannot please all my students or make them interested in my class, having them reflect on their own experiences and learning (and allowing them to work on things that matter to them!) helps them foster a sense of investment in their work. By implementing the values I have discussed in my course, I place students and their interests at the center of my pedagogy and teaching. It is important to me to reduce the feeling that students are completing assignments solely to get grades and get out of my class. When students leave my classroom, they can utilize proper grammar, style, and citation conventions. However, more importantly, they come away with lasting professional and writerly capacities, new ideas that excite them, and a holistic, open-minded view of all the things that English can be and do in the world.

Works Cited

- Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Murray, Donald. "Teaching Writing as a Process not a Product." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, edited by Victor Villanueva and Kristin L. Arola, National Council of Teachers of English, 2011, pp. 3-6.
- Smith, Sidonie. "A Twenty-First Century Doctoral Curriculum: Praxis, Scholarly Communication, and Capacity Building." *Graduate Education for a Thriving Humanities Ecosystem*, edited by Stacy M. Hartman and Yevgenya Strakovsky, Modern Language Association, 2023, pp. 25-40.
- Tinberg, Howard. "Teaching for Transfer: A Passport for Writing in New Contexts." *Peer Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2017, pp. 17-20. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/teaching-transfer-passport-writing-new-contexts/docview/1924792620/se-2>.