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How to Write about Writing

Monica Reyes

Step 1:

Begin by entering the classroom of *that teacher - that English teacher* who changes your life. In her Composition I and II classes, you read. You read fiction and nonfiction. This becomes addictive. *That English teacher* introduces you to literary criticism; she explains how Freud has everything to do with *Hamlet*. Meet Joseph Campbell and fall in love (through print, of course). Dwell in characters, settings and plots that fascinate you. Feel compelled to write about this fascination in essays. Feel compelled to write your own fascinating stories. Then comes the epiphanic moment when you begin to understand how reading fiction allows you to understand yourself and your world better. Read and write to create meaning. You finally use your brain in school as you analyze various forms of writing. Learn how to research and write with credibility. You consider, for the first time (consciously) rhetoric, audience, purpose and form. If “books are uniquely portable magic,” like Stephen King believes (104), than *that English teacher* was a cunning witch, mixing Composition and Literature in a bubbling cauldron innocuously labeled “Dual Enrollment”; you drink the potion daily. You *want* to go to her class. You *want* to read and write *with curiosity*. Eventually, her teaching leads you to where you are now, an English lecturer at a new university. But that comes later, before your breakdown.

Step 2:

Continue your English studies in college. Repeat Step 1 to varying degrees with various instructors. Get a student job as a writing tutor along the way despite being completely unprepared and untrained for this. Realize that people were not kidding when they said they don’t like to read and write. Tutor hundreds of students for 2 years who don’t have the confidence to share their writing drafts, which, at this point, are usually essays about literature. Sit next to these students. Ask them questions, and smile. Point out common spelling errors and show them where a ~~coma~~ comma goes. Focus on “rules of writing.” Tell them you can break down the writing with them in 5 easy paragraphs, which, you will learn in the near future, is a sin punishable by death in some writing pedagogy circles. Smile again when students communicate clearly, albeit uncreatively, on paper. Realize that teaching language feels right for you.

Graduate with a B.A. in English Literature, and get your certification to teach. Teach English and Reading at a middle school. The fervent highs and heartbreaking lows at this job are akin to a dysfunctional relationship. The breakup is imminent.

Go back to school for your M.A. in English Literature. Have amazing discussions. Feel your baby kick within your womb as you read Foucault, Jung and Baudrillard aloud to her. Swim in fiction and theory- a nice place to drown. Discover “how *you* write” as you write your thesis. Your writing process consists of going for runs, jotting thoughts down on napkins, having conversations with yourself, cutting up chunks of your drafts with scissors, reading lots of samples, deleting whole paragraphs and watching movies to listen for ideas. Graduate.

Teach Composition and Literature at a community college for a couple of years. Keep telling your students you can break down the writing with them in 5 easy paragraphs. Smile again when they communicate clearly, albeit uncreatively, on paper. Remember that the fun happens *mostly* in literature class. Read sporadically. Write often. Grade endlessly.

Step 3:

Get a job teaching Writing at a new university. With confusion and apprehension, smile as you learn how your new campus separates the Writing Department from the Literature Department. Inwardly console yourself as you painfully realize that teaching Emily Dickinson is a far, far away possibility at this point. Your colleagues swear by “writing about writing”. You are, at times, very excited about this.

Discover an article by Erika Lindemann, "Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature," when a colleague shares a folder full of scholarly articles to prove “writing about writing” works.

Your smile quivers and fades as you read, "When freshmen read and write about imaginative literature alone, they remain poorly prepared for the writing required of them in courses outside the English department" (311). Remember that you’ve heard this before, in a less cordial manner, from colleagues throughout your career: "our students are not English majors!" Translation: *leave your lit at home, writing teacher*.

Wonder if all of your colleagues have Rhet/Comp degrees.

Muse over how you will discuss reading and writing practice with students who mostly take their grades seriously, yet, by their own admission, don’t like to read and write. Wonder how they made it into college with “good” grades. Imagine yourself selling them the idea: “You will really need this, folks!” Then imagine that they don’t believe a word. Ask yourself if you believe it.

After some good red wine and texts to your “lit friends” in other departments and schools, conclude that you are not the only writing lecturer who has a literature degree. Go to sleep wondering why you should throw the baby out with the bathwater.

You are intrigued by the "Personal Literacy Autobiography" assignment suggested by colleagues because, maybe, if the planets align perfectly, your students will reflect on their writing choices. Within the first week of class, notice that students are pondering why they don't like to read, or why they are scared of writing, and perhaps this is entirely new to them and will lead them (and you) down a road of discovery that brings beneficial change and... *dare you whisper it with eyes closed?... student autonomy*.

Smile a bit more hopefully now.

Crave poetry. Despite your, and you imagine countless others’, life-changing experience with literature in college, you read in articles, like the one by Lindemann, how there isn't a need to incorporate the "humanistic content" into a FYC course because "college students must take humanities, arts, and literature courses" (313). Conclude her opinions are outdated indeed.

Think of your students, and how the sophomore literature “requirement” is no longer required. Look at the sexy ad on the classroom wall for the course your students can take instead of literature: "The History of Rock n' Roll". Swallow down the painful lump in your throat and imagine that literature doesn't stand a chance. Ask yourself if your students will

leave this university with a four-year degree, and never read Shakespeare. Consider how people don't think it matters anyway.

Overcompensate by reading more poetry to your daughters.

Teach the writing process because it is useful. Cringe because you know writing is art. Assign many readings. Assign many reflective, analytical writing assignments.

Remind yourself that useful is good.

Take the edge off the professional pain by planning to have students blog about various pieces of short fiction or poetry that focus on writing and the writer's experience. Select these works with great scrutiny- this may be the only chance at literature they will have in their academic careers.

Step 4:

Have that breakdown. Wonder what you did to offend the literary gods, and curse instantly when you think of a few books you read recently that may have pissed them off. Decide to seriously research "writing about writing" since research is what English majors do. Consider this research is a great idea because you will buy some time before you have to really move on to acceptance.

Start wondering/ realizing/ rethinking the following based on your research: What good is a writing process if your students can't use it outside of your class? Consider what each student's *own unique writing process* is and how you can help them find it (Prior 494), so that that their writing revisions will not be "teacher-based," (Sommers 582) and instead be a personal investment of their own creativity- a "constant process" (Sommers 584).

Also consider how your students' blogging assignments actually lead them to create new knowledge, not simply practice their writing (Downs & Wardle 322).

You are in the "letting go" phase of rebirth.

Grade sporadically. Write often. Read endlessly. Drink more wine.

Help your students build their Writing e-Portfolios, a major project that requires them to perpetually reflect on their reading, writing and learning.

Smile when your students begin considering their writing choices with you. Smile when *that student -the student who should fail-* starts to reach out to you for help. When she makes a smart writing choice about how to find common ground with her audience, blog about it because you learn as you write too.

Widen your eyes when your students show creativity in their rhetorical choices, like when one young woman becomes aware in her blog post how she is an audience unto herself. Decide that perhaps you are finding your groove in this method.

Step 5:

Sit and grade many e-Portfolio argumentative presentations. Smile again when most students communicate clearly, albeit uncreatively, in person and electronically about how writing reflectively has impacted them. Drop your pen when *that student- the student who is desperate for creativity* - presents his work with conviction.

Breathe a sigh of relief when *that student* utters these words: “Putting together this e-folio allowed me to revise *myself*; and that is what I learned in this class- I can constantly recreate meaning.” You are reminded of literature. Writing is art again. You are having fun. Rethink “the writing rules” and the “writing process” as linear steps (Sommers 578). Write a piece for an English studies journal about how you are learning to teach “writing about writing”. Use the second person to make a point to your literature colleagues who find themselves teaching writing. Finally realize that you are not angry that “writing about writing” is your new lot. Your real fury is the fading and cliché place literature now has in education; and unfortunately, the home of many students’ first endearing experiences with fiction and poetry- freshman English- no longer exists. Make new meanings and build understanding as you revise this piece for the rest of your career. Don’t apologize when you heartily disagree that “literature teaching offers the writing teacher no model worth emulating” (Lindemann 314).

Smile hopefully as you reach, yet again, for a pencil and *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. You are inspired by her rhetoric.

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