

Vermont Statutes Annotated, Title 16 V.S.A. § 164 (2000). Available online:
www.state.vt.us/educ/edrules.htm

Wolk, D. (2000, August 22). Opening day workshop, Springfield School District, Vermont.

Setting the Foundation for Success in Writing: A Positive Experience

Norma Roth
B.A. Hunter College, M.A. Simmons College,
J.D. Suffolk Law School,
Adjunct Professor, Plymouth State University

Good writing and the activities surrounding the learning process (conferences, group work, sharing of ideas) do not exist in a vacuum. Good writing is a composite and continuum: it builds, sometimes fast, more often slowly. As students grow in comfort level with themselves, their peers and their instructor; as they realize that peers and instructors alike can offer genuine help, and criticize constructively - they become even more giving. Reading and journal circles become testing grounds for new ideas, for trying new forms of writing, for taking responsibility; and for taking pride in individual accomplishment.

Background

Twenty-one first-year Composition students faced me, from five (5) different states and backgrounds. Student academic goals ranged from mostly "undecided" to teaching mathematics and accounting. The range of writing skills, as evidenced by initial class samples, were even more varied. Any one who has taught a first-year Composition knows this is a typical incoming class.

"Writing, writing, writing...." is what the Chairman of the department had said to me. I took his words seriously. This would not be a talking class; it would be a writing class.

In the beginning, the students wrote who they were, where they came from, what their goals were and what their experiences had been with writing up to this point

Both surprising and revealing to me were the comments students wrote on a self-assessment tool I included with their first written assignment asking them to identify their strengths and weaknesses: One student wrote: My introductions are boring. I want readers to want to read my essays. The sincerity of the comment hit a responsive chord, and I made a mental note to focus on introductions at once. Another told me he knew writing was important, even to a "business major, and recognized he would not get to where he wanted without knowing how to write better. Then there were the students who said: My vocabulary is limited, I use the same words over and over; and another, who added: I keep writing the same things to stretch my papers to the right length, and finally, one striking comment that appeared over and over: I have such bad feelings about writing; I used to like it, but....I did not know what caused this, and could not do extensive research at that time, but I knew the negative "mind-set" would have to be addressed before I could accomplish my stated goals.

One of the keys for setting a foundation for success in writing was convincing the students that this was their opportunity to assess strengths and weaknesses and to overcome the weaknesses and to recognize the strengths. I stressed that they might not find such an opportunity again—a class devoted to writing, in all different forms—

personal, argumentative, informative, research and even practice essay examinations. Further, I told them they would need writing skills throughout their university career; whether they took advantage of it was their own decision. In the end, each student was responsible for his or her own work, for making it the "best" he or she could; and that the success or failure belonged to each of them individually. As the term got under way, as we went through endless "conferences"—different in kind, but significant and useful, they trusted me on that; as we went through peer evaluation sessions, they understood it better, and as they revised and rewrote, sometimes endlessly, their works in progress which never seemed quite done, they began to understand the process a bit better. One student wrote: I have realized that enhancing my writing skills in this class is not an easy process and it takes practice as well as patience in order to better your writing skills.

When, towards the end of the semester, the students and I decided together to produce a class publication, they reviewed each other's material still again—and then started to pull back their own work, voluntarily, to "look at one more time"—As we worked together to put the finishing touches on *Our Writers' Works*—not a perfect publication, but one in which every one contributed at least one essay—their self-motivation and pride in accomplishment told me that all went well.

Five Principles

The research developed a set of five (5) principles based on early student assessments of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Principle One: The Syllabus As A Floating Tool

The process of reevaluation, revision, reprioritizing to suit both the pre-planned lesson or unit and student responses is a challenge most teachers face every single day. Simply stated, teachers must design a syllabus to meet immediate needs; constantly re-evaluate the syllabus based on students' growth, progress, self evaluations; collect empirical data on an on-going basis; and build in enough flexibility to the syllabus to reprioritize.

Principle Two: Exploring and Expanding Peer Techniques

Of all the teaching methods used in teaching writing, Peer Editing rates high on the list for positive and long-term effects. For those of us who use it, we cannot imagine life without it.

As to the identified problem of two different types of student writing skills and talents, careful placement of students coupled with careful preparation resulted in better than anticipated results. Most students were eager to give what they did best—and a wonderful interchange and exchange of skills and talents resulted; students engaged in honest and open dialogue. I knew the process was working well, when one student who had seemed quite reticent about sharing with her group initially could take pride in the sharing of some materials from one of her essays with the class: I want to feel like I can write and flow with my words. I want to find my own voice—so that when I go out into the real world, I teach young children what I have learned.

Principle Three: New Ways to Make An Old Standby A Mighty Tool

Conferences as we know them are a basic tool: They should be lively, interesting, requested, looked forward to by both student and teacher, and can, if used effectively, make a difference in the lives of your students and the outcomes and objectives of any basic composition course.

When I began to set up the obligatory conferences, strangely I was finding that more than one-half to maybe three-quarters of my class had conflicts with the conference time I had set aside in my office.

Principle Four: Give Students Opportunity to Participate in Outcomes and Build Re-

spect and Responsibility

Student participation in the course development process is a cornerstone of education. Mutual respect is the foundation that enables us to teach well and participation the foundation that makes students want to learn. Students must buy into the aspect of "writing, writing, writing" for development of writing skills to be an effective outcome.

To accomplish this, a multitude of assessment and evaluation tools were designed to determine what method was working and what else was needed to make assignments on units more successful. This allowed for continuous reevaluation of lesson plans and reprioritizing, which was essential to the overall success of outcomes desired.

Principle Five: Bringing It All Together: A Joint Project

My objective was to find a project that would incorporate and build on writing skills learned throughout the semester. I neither wanted to lose the momentum of "writing, writing, writing" nor the fine peer group work and respect that had developed as a class. I suggested a class publication. My suggestion was readily accepted despite the fact that much of the project would require extracurricular work and time.

Students had selection, editing, design and layout committees. The students realized that much of the work would have to be done in fits and starts and outside the classroom. They took total responsibility.

On that basis, students went through all their work, pulled out all the peer editing, used their handbooks on grammar and structure, used each other, and continued to review and revise until the last moment.