



Writing Performance: A Class Act

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Most people will not become great chefs but are, nonetheless, capable of learning basic cooking skills through books, observation, and practice. Likewise, most people will not become great writers but are capable of learning basic writing skills. Writing texts may be more difficult to follow than cookbooks, but they do provide sample essays completed by students or professional writers along with instructions on how to produce a similar essay of one's own. They often include explanations and sample results of techniques used in the process of writing essays (e.g., clustering, outlining, editing). Thus, students of writing are exposed to models of completed essays and output from writing process techniques accompanied by explanations and instructions on how to write. Then, they get to practice.

But how about observing the living process of writing? How about learning from a writer writing, as we might learn from a cook cooking?

Because I enjoy learning by watching and mimicking as well as by reading, I have been exploring ways in which I can model the writing process in my classroom in the context of the lesson. I am the writer-in-residence in my classroom. Since the process of my completing a piece of writing is a long one and it is not practical for students to sit and observe me from start to finish, I select parts of the process which are easily illustrated in class. Some examples are included below.

To model prewriting, I have the students give me a topic on which to brainstorm on the blackboard or overhead projector, eventually coming up with a thesis. Taking a thesis, I brainstorm on the contents of my composition, narrowing down my main points and organizing by numbering the points or by clustering. Beginning with a few main points, I list ideas for supporting details. I can do the same type of exercise using freewriting, underlining key words, and looping back to freewrite on these ideas, thereby limiting a topic. Such exercises take about 20 minutes and are followed by the students' doing the same as a class, in groups, or individually as appropriate.

To model revision and editing, I copy and distribute different stages of a piece of my writing which we go through as a class to better understand the choices a writer must make during revision. I also solicit feedback from the students either in groups or individually, on comment sheets. When writing their own compositions, they each must do three drafts and share their work in small groups for both written and oral feedback. My sharing my work provides a framework for them to share theirs with their classmates, and the class ultimately produces a booklet of our selected writings.

I also share excerpts from my journal. Sharing my journal strengthens the bond between my students and me, thereby building trust. This is necessary if I expect students to expose themselves on paper. After all, I read their journals and require them to share with neighbors in class. Sharing my journal also lets them see my ruminations on writing as well as seeds of ideas for some of my written pieces. They, in turn, are asked to write about their writing process and experiences and to collect ideas for compositions from their journal entries, which include personal notes, responses to readings, thoughts on writing, and comments on the class.

Most importantly, I write in class when students do and then read my work aloud, often revising as I go along. This is very effectively done if I put my writing on the overhead. Students' writing can also be put on the overhead, and once they get used to the idea of writing and then reading aloud, most of them enjoy it. An added benefit of my active participation in the writing class is that the class is more enjoyable for me—I get to write and get feedback more often. I get to share the responsibility of evaluating writing, I get to know my students better—and so I'm more animated and enthusiastic about the class. This has a positive effect on the students' attitude about writing. We become a community of writers.

Presenting ourselves to our students as models of what we are teaching them to do or be is nothing new. In that respect, the teacher-student relationship in the writing class is like the master-apprentice relationship in the skills trades. However, this analogy is not a perfect one since we see our students for only a limited number of hours per week, and they generally have aspirations outside of the field of writing. Still, I have found that my approaching the task of teaching composition to ESL students at the community college as if my students were novice writers apprenticed to me, their *maestro* (*teacher*, in Italian), has enlivened the writing class and improved my teaching and their learning. And that's the bottom line. ■