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There's No Such Thing as Too Many Cooks in the Classroom

After months of listening to my vague complaints of not being completely satisfied with teaching writing, despite my love of both teaching and writing, a close friend of mine and former composition teacher herself summed up all my stewing in one apt analogy. "Of course you're unhappy with what you're doing," she let fly one day. "It's just like putting on one big meal after another: All you do is prepare, prepare, prepare, and then clean up, clean up, clean up. You're left with almost no time or energy to enjoy the meal in between."

Sound familiar? It sure did to me! I prepared classes into minutiae, evaluated papers into eternity, and in between I met with classes full of students who didn't seem nearly grateful enough for all my hard work and concern. It was like a perpetual Thanksgiving dinner: It just looked effortless to my students because I slaved long and hard under a hot desk lamp to make it look that way.

This realization, though heartening because of the clarity it produced on one level, was confusing on another level. Maybe I was guilty of overkill in my attempts to be the best teacher possible, but I couldn't believe the alternative was to surrender to what I looked upon as the fast-food purveyors of teaching: the burned-out, the lazy, the cynical, and the less-than-capable who somehow manage to survive in every discipline. Yet learning to give less to my teaching sounded like the only possible response to overkill, which in turn sounded suspiciously like learning to serve up junk food. The fact that the friend who flashed this realization before my eyes had given up teaching completely was not lost on me either; but she was working at least as long and hard in her present career, so conclusions weren't easily drawn.

Searching through scraps of memory and experience from my years as student as well as teacher brought me back to the same point again and again: Very good teaching is inseparable from very hard work. Try as I might, I couldn't find the line between hard work and overkill, so I was about to acquiesce to the idea of slaving away alone in a hot educational kitchen the rest of my life and being vaguely dissatisfied in the name of duty and honor when I remembered a vital point about my friend who made the analogy in the first place. Although she's a great cook, she never does the cleanup after the meals she prepares. And that may be the key to her continuing love affair with cooking through all these years.

In other words, I was finally struck by what may have been obvious to the non-Thanksgiving-dinner-producing people of the world all along: Not all hard work is alike. There is a difference between miserable hard work (e.g., overkill) and positive hard work (what I now, at times, become exuberant enough about to think of as joyful hard work). The implications of this difference can have an effect on both our approaches to and satisfaction with teaching.

Miserable hard work is doing it all ourselves but receiving very little acknowledgement for our efforts because these efforts are, paradoxically, both hidden and selfish: We are the ones who shop for the ideas, buy those that we believe are appropriate, prepare the ideas in the way we find most interesting, feed them to our students, and then evaluate their digestion of the ideas presented. So we prepare, prepare, prepare, and then we clean up, clean up, clean up—over and over again. This approach does get the turkey on the table, but it rarely leaves students or teacher satisfied. What is there to be satisfied about? We as teachers have claimed full responsibility for the success of the class and so become like anxious hosts, hoping above all else to avoid any embarrassing social blunders. The students are denied any part of the creation of the class or even their own ideas, so naturally they have no strong feelings either way about the class, as long as they can figure out what is expected of them and play along for a passing grade. Satisfaction, in the end, is choked out of the class for all of us.

How, then, does positive hard work differ from miserable hard work? I'm sure the true answer is in ways we'll never stop discovering—since variations on the theme "take risks together and learn together" are limitless. One element basic to all positive hard work in teaching seems to be this willingness not only to encourage students to take risks in learning but to take risks ourselves. From this basis, some of the steps I'm

beginning to take in my own teaching are the following:

— I try to start by believing that every person in the room—regardless of the level of the class—has something valid to say that is worth his or her time to learn to say in writing.
— I focus my class on writing first and last because it is a writing class. I avoid the seemingly safer approaches of grammar for grammar's sake or exercises to fill the hours. These approaches vest me again with all the responsibility (I have all the right answers!) while stealing writing and thinking time from the class.
— I encourage collaboration in writing and at times teach effective methods of collaboration. I'm aware of strong opposition to collaborative writing by teachers who fear their students will never become independent writers. But I have seen dramatic gains in writing skill and confidence by students encouraged to learn from one another's strengths. Peter Elbow makes a wonderful point about collaborative writing:

> If we help them use collaboration to make their own papers better than they could make them without help . . . they will have the feel for a good paper. They will have the taste of it in their mouths. That feel or taste may be the biggest aid of all in the ensuing year when it comes to learning to do it alone.

— I'm learning to listen and respond to ideas I've never thought of before, which arise from students forced to come up with their own ideas. This forces me, also, to take the risk of thinking on my feet.
— I'm also learning to endure blank spots and silences, rather than filling them myself. This allows students to learn about silence, about its being good at times and embarrassingly revealing, like nakedness, at other times.
— I try consciously to push aside cynicism, which rubs off on students like newspaper ink on fingers and leaves them too tarnished to accept all the fresh ideas that could be available to them.
— In place of cynicism, I try to cultivate and convey an honest appreciation of my subject and a strong sense of purpose. I found this to be impossible when I was doing no writing of my own.

I realize that these are not concrete suggestions for specific action, as we would demand from our students. But maybe every now and then we need to stop and think hard about why we do what we do and let the how develop on its own. I'm just beginning to discover how this more positive approach can affect my teaching and my students' learning. One overall suggestion I can offer is to try each semester to give students something you can all be thankful for: Teach them to prepare their own feasts.

Elbow, Peter. "A Note About Collaboration." Teachers & Writers Magazine 19.4 (1988): 4.

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