



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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PRACTICING WHAT YOU TEACH

Some time ago in an introductory graduate-level education course, a professor looked out at the classroom of would-be teachers and said, rather offhandedly, “Never, under any circumstances, ask your students to do an assignment that you either can’t do or won’t do yourself.” I immediately thought of Coach Andrews, who used to drive his silver Camaro alongside our freshman basketball squad as we pounded the pavement during conditioning. Could Coach do what he was asking of us? Would he? I don’t know for sure, but I have a hunch. I do, however, know a group of fourteen-year old boys who would have had greater respect for a man had he sweated alongside us, even if he had only done so once.

Although I do not remember the professor’s name, I remember her words struck a chord, and they have helped guide my career in teaching English at the college level.

As is true with many of us, I paid my dues as an adjunct instructor. For those first five years, I taught English composition several nights a week while holding down a full-time position to pay the mortgage and insure my young family. But I knew, even then, I was one of the fortunate ones, for I was able to make a living working in a field related to my area of interest. While my friends were selling shoes or chopping vegetables by day and teaching a section of 101 here and there by night, I was paid to make the inaccessible prose of aerospace engineers accessible to the populous. And so it was that I was paid to play with *my* words during the day and paid to help students play with *their* words during the night.

It was during this time I realized—perhaps fully for the first time—the benefits of practicing what I was teaching. One immediate benefit I saw from practicing what I was teaching was how it shaped my relationship with my students and my role as a teacher in the classroom. I found that practicing my own craft helped me see what students experience as they face each new writing assignment. Because I, too, was faced with

difficult writing tasks on a daily basis, I could relate to the anxiety that many young student writers feel. And it’s easy to forget what that is like. Writing can be very scary. I don’t believe I would have been as effective a teacher lecturing about brainstorming, invention strategies, and the writing process if I had not been exploring and practicing them myself.

In many cases, I was able to share with my students the challenges I was facing at work, and I quickly saw how students responded. I saw them recognizing that writing has applications and implications far beyond the classroom and that even their teacher experienced frustration and, sometimes, victory. In a sense, it made me human in their eyes, and it’s easy for students and teachers to forget one another’s frailties.

One night when we were working on revising our essays, I brought in a folder from work. In it was an article I had recently completed for an aerospace trade magazine. I wanted my students to see how one of my projects evolved from invention and research to planning and drafting, and how it ultimately appeared in a final, approved draft ready for release. They could not believe that nine different readers from nine different offices had to review, coordinate, edit, and clear the article before it could be released to the media. While some changes were substantive, the majority were petty, “change ‘happy’ to ‘glad’” changes, and students began to see that a writer needs thick skin if he or she is to survive. After that night, when it came to revising their essays, they didn’t complain quite so loudly.

Two years ago, I acquired a full-time, tenure-track teaching position. I found that because I no longer wrote on a daily basis or had to produce quality copy on deadline, my skills and my edge began to wane. Last semester, I decided to write alongside my English 101 students while they were working on their narrative essays. We did everything together—brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading. We shared the same experience of budgeting our time and managing our deadlines, and it was remarkable. I was able to see what obstacles my students were facing with the assignment, how tricky it is to weave the elements of a successful narrative into a 350-500 word



essay, and, of course, the pressure of a deadline looming in the not-so-distant future. Although I was still their teacher, I believe they saw me in a different light; they saw me for what I was—just another writer in the class. Furthermore, the nature of the narrative assignment allowed them to see the person in me, not the teacher. During our wrap-up session, Ben, a young man who had just separated from a tour of the Army, which included marching into a war-torn Kosovo on his twenty-first birthday, said, “You know, it’s a lot easier to follow a leader into battle when you know he’s been there before.”

I know it’s not realistic or possible for us to work alongside our students with every assignment. I do, however, know a group of 25 composition students and an instructor who both know and respect one another more because the instructor—just once—was willing to do what he as was asking of them. Practice what you teach.

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