

Cover Essay for Final Portfolio: English 315

Rachael Sloan

In reading my original philosophy paper, I can see several areas in which my views have slightly changed or been added on to after what I have learned in Teaching Writing this semester. I am glad that I have had this class, because I had not really thought about the way in which students should be taught writing, and I think it is helpful for teachers to learn as much as they can about every topic they will be teaching; since writing is an SOL, and, more importantly, a life skill, teachers should be cognizant of how and why they teach writing in the ways that they do. In this class, I have realized that I should be more intentional in the way that I will teach writing, and I will set aside specific time for writing every day, no matter what the genre or context of the writing is.

In my original philosophy essay, I wrote, "Until they see that it can be cathartic and useful, many students will probably continue to insist that they hate writing." I cannot disagree with this statement, but I would like to add to it. I still believe that students can find writing to be cathartic and useful, but I also think that they will discover those qualities of writing by doing it every day and by being given the choice of what and how to write, rather than having to write what the teacher assigns day after day. It is no wonder to me that students seem confused by the idea of "creative writing" when they have never before been encouraged to write anything of their own choice! I do want students to learn to love writing, and to see it as not only useful

in a methodical manner, as with technical writing, but also in a way that they can express themselves creatively and even reinvent themselves.

I also wrote, “However, I think it is important to teach grammar as part of teaching writing, since grammar is the necessary framework that holds the written product together, and the writing could become unintelligible without it.” I still stand by this statement, as well, but I would add a qualification that grammar should *never* be taught separately from writing. I really like the idea of writing with mini-lessons, and I think that grammar could be a useful topic to incorporate into many mini-lessons, especially because I would be able to assess (informally through students’ writing) what grammatical errors students were making, and then specifically address them in the context of writing. I still think it is important to explain to students that grammar is not an arbitrary measure, but rather, it is a standard means of communication that is necessary for the reader to understand the writing, just as using imagery or “thoughtshots” or “snapshots” can help the reader better understand the writing. If students understand how grammar can “enrich and enhance writing,” as our text was called, they will probably be more enthusiastic about using it, rather than just learning it as another rote exercise of English class.

In my original philosophy paper, I also wrote, “It is important to teach students how to express themselves through writing, and to write with structure, but have the freedom to move beyond that structure. Once students have mastered the basic concept, I think they should be taught to expand and explore different ways of writing to increase their skills and find different ways to write.” Today, when I read those two sentences, I would like to change them, because I have come to the conclusion that learning to write is not all about learning to write *papers*. It

is important for students to learn to express themselves, and to learn different structures in writing, but they should not be focusing on writing papers as their only means of writing! Rather, students should be experimenting with different genres of writing and reading the works of authors who use other kinds of writing; Karen Hesse, the author I researched, has written and received awards for books both in blank verse poetry and in prose, showing that a writer can use multiple genres successfully. To return to my original statement, I no longer think that students should be taught one structure and then taught how to branch off of that structure; rather, I think students should just be allowed to write, and should be offered exposure to multiple genres of writing, so that they can decide what *they* would like to write.

I still completely agree with my next main point from my original paper: “So much writing in school is seen by students as being “pointless,” and frankly, some of it probably is. When students think that their work is useless, it is not surprising that they are less likely to put much effort into it or try to enjoy it.” As we have discussed and read in class, students are too often expected to write about things they do not like, things that have no impact on their lives, rather than their own feelings and experiences or other topics to which they can relate. If we as teachers truly see writing as an important skill that is necessary but also enjoyable, we should allow students to write about things that they find enjoyable, so that they can learn how to write about things that are necessary, but not always enjoyable to write about.

One of the last statements in my original paper backs up my previous point here, that students should write about topics of their choice: “Students may write about anything they choose, or they may be given a topic, but they need to be encouraged to keep writing.” I would

like to add to that statement that students should be given some choices in every piece of writing they have. Rather than being instructed of the style, genre, and topic of every piece of writing, students should have input on at least one of those three criteria. For example, students may be told to write a formal research essay, but they are allowed to choose the topic; or, students will be told to write something about the seasons, but they may choose how they wish to write it. However, I will still stand behind the last part of my original statement: students should always be encouraged to keep writing!

I would like to add a few more points to my newly revised philosophy of writing. First, I would like to note that writing and reading are inextricably linked. At the same time that I have taken this writing class, I have also been taking the Early Literacy class and working with my first-grade book buddy. I have seen how difficult and pain-staking writing is for him; it took him all of ten minutes to write, "I like cupcakes. Cupcakes taste good." However, I have also seen his joy as he read books he liked, and even more as he read the stories that I wrote especially for him. I encouraged him at the end of our ten weeks to continue writing, no matter what, and I gave him the book in which I wrote his stories, so that he could continue to write on his own. As I worked with my book buddy, and as I have thought and read about the teaching of writing, I have seen more and more that writing must go alongside reading. When I worked on my website project about Karen Hesse, I noticed many ways that her writing, especially her poetry in *Out of the Dust*, could be used to teach several facets of writing to students within the context of reading.

Finally, this class has reminded me that as a teacher, I should write along with my students! I greatly enjoyed my time in the writing circle with Amy and Katie; although I did not always know what or how to write, it was a great experience for me to be able to take a break from academic writing and have fun with what I wrote! I was nearly overwhelmed at first by all of the options – it is hard to be given a blank slate with just a topic and choose just one style or genre in which to write. However, it was an excellent exercise for me, and it helped me remember why I like to write. I also enjoyed hearing the writings of Katie and Amy, since we are such different writers, and being able to give feedback on their writings without fear of criticism. As a teacher, I plan to write along with my students, and to let them hear my writing some of the time, just as they will be sharing their writings with the class some of the time. I hope to share my writing with them not as their teacher giving instructions, but as a fellow author who wants to share her love of writing.

In my original philosophy statement, I did not mention assessment. I do feel that assessment is important, but my idea of how to assess students has changed. Rather than only assessing students' final papers on a subject, I would like to compare students' starting points with how they have grown, and to use my knowledge of each individual as a writer to make decisions on assessment and grading. As I mentioned earlier, I would also like to use informal assessment to make decisions about what to teach next in mini-lessons in class, in order to teach things that are relevant and interesting to students.

Finally, I would like to mention my philosophy of using digital writing tools, although I have significantly discussed my ideas on that in my reflection on the digital workshop. I believe

that teachers should take advantage of digital writing tools, and expose students to as many different types of tools and genres as possible, but that digital writing should be a tool rather than a goal, because although the world, and writing, are shifting more and more towards digitalized media, the basics of writing to convey a message remain the same. However students choose to write, with whatever means they choose, I want students to learn to express themselves to the best of their abilities, because only then will they truly become writers.