

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN DIALOGUE

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Currently I have settled on several aims in my teaching:

- Create a course with a well-defined set of **content-rich problems** (in FYS, we ponder these questions: What do we owe the poor? What effect does consumer culture have on us? What community problem should we solve?).
- Create a course where the **problems and questions ignite curiosity** in the students; where interaction over problems is **playful**; where **dialogue among students increases** because it's a fundamental assumption about why humans use language.
- Create **skill linkages between assignments**, ideally ramping up expectations (In FYS, I expect students to learn to quote one text appropriately; then use one quoted text to understand another; then marshal evidence from several quoted sources to develop a claim).
- Create assignments that **link reading and writing skills** (we look for thesis statements in what we read, as we attempt to craft them in our own writing; we examine how other writers use sources, as we attempt to use sources in our own writing; etc.).
- Create classroom events/lessons that move students from interpersonal to large-group exchange, progressively moving the literacy into the public (via chalkboard, overhead, and Blackboard).

Pursuing these aims, I think of myself as **content-centered and student-centered**, with an eye on the **general academic conventions** writers need to develop.

Now, what actually happens (or what the challenges are)...

I'd like to think that I'm helping students learn how to be writers—people who use language for particular audiences in particular situations, with real motives. School-based writing is sometimes tough to push into that mold. I fail to promote genuine dialogue—or I get anxious that it isn't happening, and after the fact, discover that it is. I just couldn't see the dialogues (external and internal) happening. So, I'm a teacher wanting to keep control, thinking I can steer the learning. I can steer the content; I can create structures for learning, but not necessarily the learning itself

I have lately been trying to combine my interest in engaging students in dialogue with a more genre-focused approach. What kind of writing are we doing? What are its moves? What are its typical audiences? What kinds of problems or ideas are pursued in this kind of writing? Why write about this in this way?

From my Commonplace Book on Teaching

I also want to share a few quotations from a journal I keep on teaching...

A rhetorician, I take it, is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can lead to the views transcending the limitations of each. — **Kenneth Burke, “Rhetoric--Old and New.” *New Rhetorics*, 1967.**

This quotation—a famous one in the field of Rhetoric and Composition—has always provided me a way of understanding the interactive nature of language.

...[E]very word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates.... The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. — **Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel.” *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981.**

Bakhtin helps me understand how individuals come to possess language—to enter a socio-linguistic context and appropriate it as their own.

I have long had a thirst for the historical sensibility of the spiritual life, that is, a desire to find others in history whose insight into the human spirit and perhaps even the divine/cosmic/human relationship could enrich my own. By reaching across time and culture to the present through their writings, historical figures provide a special perspective and challenge; and they help to ground us in a humanity that is not merely the conditioning of our present age. One of the ways in which I have learned about and come to appreciate the spiritual writings of the past has been through collections of excerpts, excerpts which have been assiduously gathered by common-placers. — **Norman Elliott Anderson, *Commonplacing in the Spiritual Traditions*, 2004.**

Anderson helps guide my use of commonplace books with students — journals of quotations that help the reader enter a conversation “across time and culture.”

It has turned out that mass literacy is not as easy to achieve as educational reformers had anticipated. To close the gap between the rather dismal reality and the golden future envisaged, researchers and practitioners are investing their energies in teaching methods modeled on computers and other rational means for processing information—which in turn were modeled on industrial production techniques and on military human systems design. The implicit hope is that if we discover more and more rational ways of selecting, organizing, and conveying knowledge, children will learn more effectively. Yet it seems increasingly clear that the chief impediments to literacy are not cognitive in nature. It is not that students cannot learn; it is that they do not wish

to. Computers do not suffer from motivational problems, whereas human beings do. We have not found ways as yet to program children so that they will learn the information we present to them, as computers do. Unfortunately, cognitive science has not taken adequate notice of this fact, and hence the current cognitive emphasis on teaching is missing out on an essential component of what learning is about. — **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. “Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation.” *Literacy: An Overview by 14 Experts*, 1991.**

Csikszentmihalyi helps me value play — the idea that even the college classroom needs to have a playful dimension, for play states tend to be zones of intrinsic motivation.

Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives — all appear in play.... The child moves forward essentially through play activity... Play [can] be considered a leading activity that determines the child's development. — **Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 1978.**

Along with Csikszentmihalyi, Vygotsky also helps me value play — to wonder why play drops out of classrooms from about 3rd grade on.

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