

## MOTIVATING OUR STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND, TO DO, AND TO THINK

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When Al DeCiccio asked me to speak about my approach to teaching, I immediately thought of three pieces of my past: a similar talk I gave to my fellow graduate students when I was A.B.D., my advice to playwrights at New Dramatists when I was a dramaturge there, and my experiences as a rhetorician.

When I was at RPI, a graduate student organization asked me to speak about how to prepare for oral exams. As someone who was still struggling with her dissertation and who had suffered most every anxiety over the exams, I didn't feel fully qualified to speak as an expert. I did, however, feel comfortable offering one piece of advice that I had learned as I had prepared: take no one's advice.

Giving this paradoxical lesson, I commented that many of the things people had told me about exams were not at all what I had experienced. Many of the pieces of recommendation had fallen flat for me. Many of the people offering this advice were totally different from me, studying for totally different exam areas. I had learned that no one really knows what is best for me; I alone had to learn that.

This paradoxical advice was not so different from my prelude to discussions with playwrights about their plays. At New Dramatists, we gave unfinished plays staged readings. Professional actors read from the script, book in hand, and an audience watched and reacted. After the reading, we'd all come together to talk about what we liked and didn't like about the play. The purpose of the discussion was to help the playwright figure out where to go with the unfinished draft.

My prelude was that the playwright should listen to everyone but feel compelled to follow no particular advice. The people who reacted most strongly against the play might be tapping into a powerful element of the script that unsettled them. Since plays are often intended to move people, such violent negative reaction could be a positive comment on the play. Similarly, people who "liked" the play might have found that the play offered a trite comment on life that didn't challenge any assumptions. Therefore, I recommended the playwright listen, take notes, ask questions about comments, but make her/his own decisions based on her/his goals for the play.

Here, talking to you about approaches to teaching, I offer a very similar piece of advice, one that is largely informed by my training as a rhetorician. In rhetoric, we're very concerned with audience: how can we move an audience to a particular belief or action? Audiences differ. One audience will not necessarily respond as another one does. The same audience in a different set of circumstances may behave in yet another completely different way.

When we teach, our students are our audience. We have pedagogical goals: there are certain pieces of information we hope to convey; we hope to help our students structure their thinking in a certain way; we want them to learn to do certain things. These goals are rather fixed. They're what we are hired to do; what assessment tests evaluate. However, how we get to these goals differs. Our purpose as teachers is to move our students to understand, to do, to think—and how we get them to do that differs depending on the audience and the situation. Each of us, too, has our own ethos; therefore, what works for me may

not necessarily work for you, and vice versa. What works for me in one class will not necessarily ever work again.

Teaching is rhetorical. We need to consider each class individually. Our goals are rather fixed, but how we reach our goals varies as much as we do from day to day and as much as we differ from each other.

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