

# LESS IS MORE: ENGAGING STUDENTS IN LEARNING

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Professor X teaches American literature. He believes that his role is “to bring order to the chaos of students’ minds.” Literature, he says, needs a design, a pattern for understanding. To clarify this pattern, Prof. X lectures to his students, presenting background and critical approaches to understanding.

Professor Y teaches Shakespeare. Instead of lecturing, she has made her classroom an arena for discussion. The classroom, she says, should involve challenge, discussion, risk. Her students have absolute freedom to generate ideas and to make gut level reactions in class, but are expected to justify them in their written work.

Professor Z teaches an Honors section of freshman composition. Instead of reading traditional rhetoric and expository texts, his students read essays on current composition theory. He too chooses not to lecture. Instead, he sees his role as directing discussion so that important ideas are elicited. It is the students’ responsibility, however, to provide input for discussion.

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Which professor will end the semester most satisfied with his students’ progress?

- (a) the American lit prof?
- (b) the Shakespeare prof?
- (c) the Honors English prof?

- (d) b & c?  
OR  
(e) none of the above

The answer is E—none of the above. None of the professors was pleased with his or her classes. In fact, despite the variety of approaches, all voiced similar complaints. The American lit professor complained that when he asked questions, no one answered. The Shakespeare professor complained that her students were seldom prepared, so were relieved when she lectured. The Honors English professor said much the same: his students couldn't articulate ideas; they disliked introspection; they refused to give the course any psychological investment. All ended with the same complaint: the same students always answered questions, while the rest sat passively.

Why did these teachers encounter such problems? The Carnegie Forum's task force on teaching, the Holmes Group, provides some answers. They maintain that "simple models of teaching are often most attractive to bright, studious individuals who take major responsibility for their own learning as students" (30). In the average classroom, that means possibly only five out of twenty-five, or 20%, are active learners. The rest are passive, expecting the teacher to do the work.

Many teachers, especially those on the college level, balk at dealing with that other 80%. To do so, they contend, would constitute spoon-feeding. The Holmes Group disagrees with this view of teaching. Formed in response to what has been called a "crisis in public education," this group believes that teaching should be "conceived as a responsible and complex activity that is clearly related to both group learning and individual learner success" (30). This belief is based on their recognition that "the social context in which learning takes place is a critical dimension over which [teachers] have considerable control" (31).

This idea isn't really new. As early as 1938, Dewey was saying that the teacher should design learning activities in which all students participate and contribute (56). Forty years later, Paolo Friere came to the same conclusion. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he maintained that the more actively students explore a subject, the more critically aware they become, thus enabling them to better comprehend (97). Following Friere, Ken Bruffee introduced the concept of collaborative learning, a way of teaching in which the

teacher's "responsibility and privilege is to arrange optimum conditions for others to learn" (470).

If noted teachers and theorists have long been espousing the de-centered classroom, why isn't it an accepted teaching practice?

Because we don't know how to do it.

In *Talking to Learn*, M.L.J. Abercombie points out that most teachers "have usually had little or no experience of having been taught in small groups themselves . . . . They consequently have no model of the teacher's behavior to follow and no basis for empathy with students in the small group situation" (1). John Trimbur expands on this when he notes that most of us have been trained in lectures and seminars, and thus have come to accept these as conventional modes of teaching (104).

The purpose of this paper is to offer some alternatives to these conventional modes of instruction, some practical applications of collaborative learning theory. We've all heard of journaling, workshopping, and linking reading with writing. All of these can be used to de-center the classroom.

## **LEARNING ABOUT THE SUBJECT**

For me, writing is the first step towards learning in a classroom. Writing also helps to de-center the classroom. To illustrate this point, I'd like to take you through the sequence of assignments that lead up to the first essay in an advanced composition course. But first, a little background.

Advanced Composition is a course in persuasive/argumentative writing. Quite often, students enter it with little writing experience beyond freshman composition. Therefore, while all the essay assignments are persuasive, the sequence moves from indirect arguments, to direct arguments, to critical analyses. I begin with indirect arguments because they usually follow a narrative pattern, one students are familiar with. The first essay is entitled "A Victim of Injustice." The students are to tell about an event in which they were treated unfairly, where they were clearly a victim of injustice. Using a narrative format, they are to persuade the audience to see their side and to gain sympathy for their unfair treatment.

The class is designed so that each day, students have a reading, writing, and journal assignment. The first reading assignments are a chapter on indirect argument and Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." (All chapters are in Lynn Bloom's *Fact*

and Artifact; all articles are in Bloom's *The Essay Connection*.) These assignments explain what an indirect argument is and provide a model essay. The first writing assignment is to describe Orwell's indirect argument. Completion requires not only comprehension of the readings, but also application of the strategies of indirect argument. To help the students decide on a topic, their journal assignment is to list times when they had been a victim of injustice.

A traditional approach to this assignment would be either a lecture on the elements of indirect argument, or a teacher-centered "discussion" (i.e., question/answer period) of the chapter and how it was exemplified in the model essay. The de-centered classroom puts the onus of learning on the students. Class begins by asking students to apply what they have learned about indirect arguments. They are given an excerpt from Judith Syfer's "Why I Want a Wife," which indirectly argues against the male's expectations of the wife's role, and asked the following questions:

1. Is this a direct or indirect argument? Explain your answer.
2. What techniques of indirect argument are used?
3. What are the advantages of this type of argument?
4. What are the disadvantages, if any?
5. Is this argument effective? Why or why not?

Such questions move the students beyond rote memorization to immediate application of what they have read. Answers provide bases for discussion. With written answers in front of them, students are willing to respond. And given Syfers' controversial subject, they are anxious to argue.

The teacher's role here is to encourage divergent responses and challenge preconceived ideas. Students are engaged in the learning process as they compare their written answers to their peers' oral arguments and contribute their own responses. Their arguments keep the students interested while they also help them to recognize and internalize elements of indirect argument. Following this discussion, the questions are applied to Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." The students' answers, buttressed with their written descriptions of his argument, enable them to discuss Orwell's piece without being prodded. Talk about the form naturally leads to a discussion of its content.

The next element of this first class period is to generate and share potential topics. Students volunteer one instance of injustice already listed in their journals. We put these on the board so those

lucky few who have never been treated unjustly can also discover potential topics. Building on this foundation, for the next class, the students have the following assignments:

**Write:** choose the two best incidents from your journal and freewrite one page on each. These will be shared in the next class.

**Read:** a sample essay, “A Victim of PJ,” and chapter on characterization.

**Journal:** were you persuaded that the author (of the sample essay) was indeed a victim? What details convinced you?

The chapter on characterization helps the students identify the persuasive details in the model essay. The journal entry helps them to read critically both assignments. It also gives the students solid information to bring into class, so they are not hesitant or unable to participate in class discussion. Nevertheless, to involve the entire class, I put the students in groups of three and ask them to use their journal entries to answer the following questions about the sample essay:

1. What was the injustice?
2. Who was the perpetrator?
3. What do you know about the perpetrator? What details show him/her to be the villain?
4. What else would you like to know about the perpetrator?
5. Are you persuaded that the author was indeed a victim? Which points sway you? Which ones don't? What would you like to know about this incident to be persuaded?

At first glance, this exercise in collaborative learning appears rather structured. But “collaborative learning” does not mean “unstructured learning.” As Bruffee and Trimbur point out, the de-centered classroom does not mean that teachers disappear or turn into coaches. Rather, teaching “involves negotiating the teacher’s authority and social standing as well as facilitating group processes” (105). Providing a focus for discussion and then letting the group members determine their answers falls into this category.

Discussing the day’s reading within the group reinforces the students’ comprehension as well as their critical reading skills. Some students were not convinced that the author had indeed been a victim and argued with their group members. So each side had to look more closely at the essay to find details to support their opinion. Once they reached a consensus, each group chose a “secretary” to report their findings.

Selecting a secretary further involves usually passive students

in the learning process. The “secretary” is often a person who would rather write than participate in discussion. But armed with written answers to questions, these serious individuals do a thorough job.

The groups’ presentations of the strengths and weaknesses of the sample essay indirectly show the students how to shape their own first drafts. The teacher’s role is to facilitate the discussion and point out its application to their essays.

For additional help in developing their first drafts, I pair off the students and ask them to read their partner’s freewrites and answer the same five questions they used in their groups (what was the injustice? etc.). This group work provides each student with a reader who can offer feedback and help select the freewrite with the most potential to develop into a first draft.

These exercises take up a week of classes. This first week could be termed “pre-writing,” since it focuses on generating ideas for the essay. The second week marks the beginning of more structured writing, however, as students begin drafting their essays.

## **LEARNING ABOUT WRITING**

Donald Murray has stated that when the teacher is talking, the students aren’t writing. So how do we help students improve their essays? Teaching writing as process, not product, appears to be the answer. But how do we engage students in the process?

The first step is to raise their consciousness. Too many students enter their English classes with a number of misperceptions: they believe that revising means “writing it over in ink”; that good writers do not revise; or that revision means correcting mechanical errors. Changing these misconceptions is a multi-layered, interactive process, which involves assigning multiple drafts, modeling the revision process, and editing in small groups.

Because most students have misperceptions regarding what good writing is and how it’s attained, I attempt to change their minds by assigning theoretical articles on composition. In doing so, we move into the realm of meta-cognition: I take the students through the process, yet build in the time and opportunity to reflect on what they are doing. To introduce students to the concept of revision, they read Donald Murray’s “The Maker’s Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts.” To focus their attention on the changes necessary between drafts, they read Linda Peterson’s “From

Egocentric Speech to Public Discourse.” To move from content to style, they read William Zinsser on “Style.”

Each of these readings is linked with a writing assignment and at least one practical application of theory. For example, the journal assignment following Murray’s article on revision is to respond, comparing his advice to their own views and revision processes. In class, the students apply Murray’s five-step revision process—looking at information, meaning, audience, form, and structure—in critiquing a sample essay. They have similar reading-writing assignments for the other theoretical essays.

These composition articles are alternated with model essays. The students read Twain’s “Uncle John’s Farm,” list the details used, then use their lists as a basis for discussing the difference between showing and telling. They read Thurber’s “University Days,” collaborate on a compilation of rules for punctuating dialogue from observing how Thurber did it, and apply them to an unpunctuated passage. They read a peer’s essay and discuss how revisions between drafts one and two improved it.

Even though these reading assignments are linked with writing, they would not have much impact if they were not related to the students’ essays. To engage my students in the writing process, I assign multiple drafts. To teach them to revise, we have daily edit sessions.

The edit sessions have a number of purposes. First, they foster collaborative learning. As students learn to work together, they realize what they have in common. They may discover that their writing skills are about equal, or that they are able to make useful suggestions to their peers. Both discoveries build confidence and change their perception that writing is a solitary, unnatural act.

In studying the benefits of collaborative learning, Abercombe found not that students acquire new information, but that they learn “how to use the information they have already acquired but have not assimilated to the point of applying it to solve problems” (92). In this context, the small group editing helps students internalize the revision process. By focusing on different skills per draft, they begin to see that semantic concerns should be dealt with before the syntactic or mechanical. So it really is changing the student’s behavior. While I recognize that not everyone will follow this process when they exit the class, they will have changed their attitudes about revision and will have learned a process that can be compressed or expanded to fit their own style.

The edit sheets I provide for these sessions help students develop both a process for revision as well as critical reading-writing skills. The questions focus the reading, while the directions teach students that critical reading means re-reading. For example, the edit sheet for Draft 1 begins by asking the students the same five questions already used in class (what was the injustice, etc.). This reinforces the reading pattern they've learned thus far. The next five questions call for descriptive responses. The students are instructed to re-read the draft, and tell which paragraphs are their favorite and which make them stumble, and why. Then they are asked to re-read one more time and star passages where dialogue would make the essay more vibrant or convincing.

The edit sheet for draft 2 builds on the strategies used in draft 1. It calls for more critical reading, asking students to describe the difference between the two drafts and explain what additional information they need to be convinced that the author was indeed a victim. To shift their focus to organization, they are asked to re-read and mark those paragraphs which are irrelevant or out of sequence. Finally, with draft 3, the edit sheet focuses on style and mechanics—e.g., it instructs the students to underline excessively wordy sentences, to circle misspelled or suspicious-looking words, or to put a line between run-on sentences.

I follow the same grouping procedure for each draft. First, I pair off the students, trying to match individuals with complementary skills, and have them exchange their drafts. Following the directions on the edit sheet, they write out their answers to the questions, return the sheet to the author, and discuss their comments. Again, writing is a particularly important element in the learning process. Researchers such as Diana George have found that despite the value of discussion within small groups, if comments are not written down, students rarely recall their editor's advice. By responding to the edit sheet in writing, students can draw on their editors when it's time to revise. Writing down answers also requires a closer reading on the editor's part. Since one of the primary goals of group work is to teach students to develop critical reading skills, linking writing with reading will aid in their development.

When the semester begins, the students find they can read their peer's drafts critically—it's always easier to see the flaws in another's work. As the semester progresses, however, the students



discover that these critical skills have transferred to reading their own writing.

## CONCLUSIONS

The strategies I've described are applied for each essay assignment. Some people may say "I don't have the time to read all this extra writing." But this method actually saves time. Incorporating drafts and using the classroom as a workshop means less preparation, more time between essays, and less time grading because many of the usual problems are eliminated through the drafting process.

These strategies have helped me accomplish what I see as the goals of a writing class: to lessen writing apprehension, to increase fluency, and to change attitudes, perceptions, and process. The result is students who write better and feel better about writing. They learn a lot because they are involved in the learning process.

Kenneth Bruffee has stated that "the form of learning is as much the content of a course as the subject matter is. . . . While students often forget much of the subject matter shortly after the class is over, they do not easily forget the experience of learning it and the values implicit in the conventions by which it was taught" (94).

When we teach our students to respond to and reflect on what they read, to share their discoveries with their peers, and to apply what they are learning, we make them active learners. Such activities do not diminish the teacher's role; indeed, they make us more important. For when the teacher does less, the students learn more.

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