Lorelei Blackburn // Teaching Philosophy

I taught my first university-level class the day after I received my master’s degree. And, although I had worked extensively with teenagers as an outreach librarian and had taught child soldiers in Uganda, I was nervous about my new official role as an instructor. My first class was composed of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds—Croatian, Italian, African-American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, Hmong, West African, White, bi-racial—and most students identified strongly with the cultures in which they were raised. Some were first-generation Americans, and almost all were first-generation college students.

On that first day, I wasn’t really certain how things would go, but I decided that, as long as I was able to connect with my students, the teaching and learning part would be easy. I figured if I respected who they were and where they came from and what brought them to my class and to the university, and if the respect was mutual, the rest would fall into place. Naïve as that may sound, it worked. Simply put, I approached teaching as I approach most interpersonal situations—with a focus on relationship building.

Students as Researchers

Many of my students come into the classroom confused about their positions; they often grapple with their new positions as adult students, as well as with their positions and relationships within the scholarly community. I attempt to remediate this sometimes-difficult negotiation by clearly addressing student position throughout the semester. For example, we discuss how to navigate the university in practical ways, such as how to write e-mails to professors. Using this as an entrée into discussions of rhetorical situations, we talk about how different audiences require different approaches, and how students can build their ethos as scholars by learning simple conventions. This lesson has an almost immediate return on investment—I often receive respectful, concise, and professional e-mails from students thanking me for teaching these skills. Students also often tell me that just knowing how to do simple tasks, such as contacting professors via e-mail or requesting meetings, assists them in creating professional relationships and in transitioning from students to scholars.

Whether teaching first-year writing to freshmen, or professional writing courses to juniors and seniors, when I respond to students’ work, I do so with several ideas in mind. First, I want to use my comments to build relationships between my students and me. So, instead of simply assigning a grade to the paper, I ask questions: “What led you down this path of inquiry? Where
do you see it taking you? How does this topic relate to your own personal experiences and why might that matter? Who might your audience be? How did you decide on this arrangement strategy?” and so on. And these types of questions, delivered via writing, digital audio recording, or conferencing, work well to facilitate discussions about writing, as is evident when students enter into scholarly conversations about their research topics. These comments are also meant to serve as models for peer reviewers.

As it is also my goal to assist students in building relationships with their research, I assess the value of my comments by the optional revisions students submit. When their revisions complicate the original lines of inquiry, take intellectual risks that weren’t apparent in their original drafts, engage in radical revision, I feel I’m meeting that goal. And when their peer reviewers engage in dialogue with one another, and they build scholarly relationships across the classroom, I assume students have deepened their relationships with their research and with one another.

**Students as Engaged Citizens**

I believe that my students are heterogeneous learners—regardless of shared cultural backgrounds—and I cannot expect their experiences to be unified. However, I think it would do students a grave disservice to assume they are not already engaged citizens. And when I acknowledge their varied personal and community relationships as relevant, I validate the knowledge they bring to the classroom. In fact, I would argue that when we honor students’ relationships within their myriad communities, we make it easier for them to reposition themselves as scholars, researchers and knowledge-makers.

I have a favorite project sequence that I assign in many of my freshman writing classes that I believe encourages emergent researchers to bridge their communities and the university. Basically, students locate a problem in a community with which they identify, they research possible solutions, they conduct an audience analysis, they write a proposal for change, and then they remix the proposal into a public service announcement targeting a different audience. Throughout the years, students have written proposals to local aldermen, state senators, university presidents, neighborhood block association presidents, school board presidents, residence hall advisors, and CEOs, among others. Students are then encouraged, but not required, to submit the proposals. Happily, they often report back that they did indeed submit the proposals to their intended audience. This indicates to me that this work has value both inside and outside the academy. It is also instrumental in helping students navigate their new positions and in encouraging them to develop new relationships with the world around them.
By structuring my classes this way, I also hope to encourage students to engage with the course readings, projects, and assignments, as I try to not only connect everything, but to make those connections explicit. For example, I use each reading multiple times: The first time, students read to learn critical reading skills, including marking up the text and actively taking notes. The second time, we use it to engage in critical analysis, and the third, in rhetorical analysis. We will also recycle some of the readings to analyze how transitions and connections are used or how the author handles paragraphing.

In addition, each small, low-stakes writing assignment is directly related to the completion of a project. And each project is a building block for the following project. To assess the usefulness of each project, I’ve begun asking students for feedback; I’ll ask questions like Why do you think I’ve asked you to do this? What do you think you could learn from this? What might you want to consider as you work on this? And when they respond with ideas I hadn’t considered, I get pretty excited. At the end of the course, after students have invested 16 weeks of research, knowledge-making, and revision, many share with me how excited they are to have (almost) painlessly written their first 10 to 12 page research paper. One student, expressing delight after writing his final project with relative ease, suggested that I tricked him into researching his project all semester long, making it “super easy” to write the final paper. I suggested he commence tricking himself in the same way for the entirety of his college career.

**Students as Service-Learners**

I was recently given the opportunity to re-design and teach a project management class to students in the professional writing major. One of the primary goals of the course was for students to learn how to navigate multiple professional relationships—with colleagues, with supervisors, and with clients. So, to better serve students, I set up the classroom to simulate an advertising agency: students were employees, I was their supervisor, their peers were colleagues. And, in order to further acclimate students to the job market, I had them submit resumes and cover letters, which I then used to “hire” them onto teams to fill specific jobs—project manager, designer, writer, editor, etc. During the course of the semester, these teams were required to respond to different rhetorical situations by carefully considering and analyzing audience as well as the purposes and expected results of each project.

That was exciting enough on its own, but, to make things even more interesting, I added a service-learning element to the class. This upped the stakes immensely, because, instead of
working on fake projects for imaginary clients, students had the opportunity to work with community partners who, at the end of each project, approved one team’s design and actually used it. This provided realistic and tangible learning experiences for students, as well as example of work they can present to prospective employers.

These assignments also encouraged students to become problem solvers and critical thinkers. For example, I gave assignments, listed some resources, and then expected students to go out and get things done. And I was amazed at how every student rose to the challenge. They figured out how to conquer technical difficulties, how to structure their teams, how to deal with workflow issues, and how to get along with one another and their clients in a professional manner. But even more amazed were the community partners/clients who were thrilled to have usable, practical, tangible results. By the end of the semester, one of the community partners was inquiring about having my students work with her organization on another, larger, higher-stakes project. Students were pleased with the results, too, as evidenced by their pride in presenting their work in pitches to the clients and the inclusion of the pieces in their portfolios.

*It’s All Related*

Growing up, it was always assumed that I would go to college. “You’re smart,” my parents would say, “of course you’ll go to college.” But, as a first generation college student, I had no idea of what to expect or how to prepare for such a drastic change. I felt that I had no place in this strange landscape, and that nothing I encountered in the academy had any connection with what I considered my “real life.” I’ve heard similar stories from my students, so to remediate that situation, I aspire to encourage my students to acquire the tools they need that are relative to their lives—both within and without the academy.

I also strive to create a classroom in which students can not only hone the rhetorical skills they bring with them, but acquire new ones and practice using them in constructive ways. I try to create a classroom in which respect is key: all languages have voice, and all voices are valid. To do so, I encourage students to use the classroom as a space to discuss issues that are relative to their lives. However, this requires a certain amount of trust and respect, which are built on relationship. And this mandates that members of the classroom learn to respect difference—be it cultural, political, or linguistic. At the end of the day, it is my hope that students will embrace positions of co-participants in the academy—as questioners not reporters, as co-learners and co-investigators not passive students, and as emerging scholars who value relationships not just information.