

Teaching Philosophy

I taught my first undergraduate course in 1996 as a graduate student. Since then, I have learned a lot about teaching and learning. Like any competent English professor, I teach my students to communicate effectively in written and oral discourse, to utilize library research methods, to learn collaboratively, to consider other perspectives and experiences, and to think critically about the intellectual and moral force of literature on their own thoughts and actions. How I achieve my goals is what makes my teaching unique. Humor, candor, and practicality are three values that guide my teaching.

I always open my classes with a question of the day, an ice-breaking technique that a fellow graduate student passed on to me. The questions range from the lighthearted to the philosophical. For example, one of the questions is, "If you had to marry a sandwich, what kind would you marry and why?" Another of the questions is, "If you had to choose only one, which would you choose: freedom or justice?" This simple classroom ritual allows students to get to know each other through their answers, it primes them for the discussion of reading assignments, and most of all it keeps them coming to class. My classes are fun, but they are also rigorous and demanding. On average, my creative writing students write 21,000 words over the course of a semester. My standards are firm, high, and achievable. Students appreciate this because many of them are repeat customers, taking up to four different courses with me during their tenure at the college.

I am straightforward with my students. I let them know on the first day that they are free to talk and write about any subject as long as they are both tactful in their delivery and open to having their views questioned by their peers. The need for tact and candor is especially keen in creative writing workshops. Creative writing students, like many students, are often reluctant to point out faults in the works of their peers. I remind them that refusing to point out those faults is a disservice to the writer. Their job, as critics, is to be honest about the mistakes they find, not malicious or mean-spirited. I encourage my students to write from personal experience, but I do warn them about the pitfalls. "But it really happened!" is not a defense for a lack of artistry or craft. This is true of both fiction and narrative nonfiction.

My students never question the practical value of creative writing. They understand that they can use their fiction writing skills to write resumes, cover letters, and the like. Through practice, they learn that good writing is crafted writing, and that crafted writing is the product of revision, not an unblemished spurt of inspired genius. They learn how to explicate, analyze, and evaluate stories using the critical vocabulary of the craft. These

critical-thinking skills are invaluable, I tell them, when it comes to making decisions about their finances, healthcare, careers, and lives.

As a teacher, I am also aware that my students have different learning styles. Some prefer working in group settings, others like to learn by doing, others prefer lectures or video presentations, and others are more comfortable communicating online. I accommodate each of these learning styles in my classes, all of which are web-enhanced. The traditional creative writing workshop model that I follow can be considered an example of group work. My creative writing students post their peer reviews on Blackboard, an online learning management system. They also use Blackboard to prepare group presentations on the sample stories that they read in our textbook, Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. The in-class exercises that I provide facilitate learning by doing. For example, my students write a scene in which two characters talk to each other from opposite sides of a locked door. At the end of the scene, the door has to open. My sensitivity to various styles of learning, and my humor, candor, and practicality continue to serve me well in the classroom.

Can creative writing be taught? Should creative writing be judged? These are two questions that every professor in the field has faced at some point in his or her career. The latter expresses a sentiment I hear most often from students. Poems and short stories are works of art, they argue, forms of self-expression that should not be subject to critiques or grades. Beauty, after all, is in the eye of the beholder. I remind my students that no one thinks twice about judging singers, dancers, musicians, sculptors, or painters. Poets and writers should not get a pass when other fine artists don't.

The suspicion that creative writing cannot be taught lurks mostly in the minds of academics outside of the field and echoes the classical debate regarding whether rhetoric was a knack or technique. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the art of persuasion. It was not Muse-inspired madness. There was a method to it. The same is true of creative writing. It is an art, and it is a craft--a craft with a set of specialized concepts, terms, and techniques, all of which can be taught and cultivated. Students get this. Otherwise they would not swell creative writing classes with their ranks. I read somewhere that if creative writing cannot be taught, then it's a crime to teach it. The same can be said of almost any field of human endeavor. Take chess, for example. Not every chess player will come to possess the genius of Kasparov, but that doesn't mean the discipline is immune to catechism. Creative writing can be taught. And if more proof be needed, then I am it. I have a BS in Computer Science. That's what I majored in as an undergraduate. The majority of what I learned about writing, I learned in graduate school, where I earned a MA in English and a MFA in Creative Writing.

The rest I picked up as a working writer and through the humbling process of trial and error that is teaching.