

When people outside of the academy ask what my area of study is, and I tell them Rhetoric & Composition, I usually get a blank stare. At this point, I state that I teach students how to write... just about anything. This is one of the joys of teaching writing—to be able to help students across the curriculum build their writing, critical thinking and communication skills.

Teaching both face-to-face and online classes, to both L1 and L2 students, my goal is to create a safe academic environment where students can learn and feel comfortable making mistakes. This is one of the first things I tell my students—that I do not expect them to write perfectly. Writing is messy. Writing is a process. Writing is about learning and not about learning rules. Yes, there are certain points I need to teach directly, but my role as an instructor is to facilitate that learning—not demand it. To that end, I want my students to understand that what they learn in my class can be applied to other situations but is not an end product in and of itself.

My approach is always rhetorical in nature. When I first ask my students to define rhetoric, many of them express it in negative terms and most consider it a type of persuasion—and that is that. Some students explain ethos, pathos and logos in their response. Asking questions is a good place to begin, and we end up with myriad perspectives on this one, very old word. Our discussion of rhetoric, what it means, what it means to them, how to ‘use’ it, etc., continues throughout the semester. Near the end, we usually come close to James Berlin’s point of view, where “the purpose of rhetoric is to study the production and reception of historically signifying practices.”¹ While my students never put it into these exact words, our focus on audience, globalization, and culture throughout the semester leads us to similar types of explanation.

Many, if not all, students enter my class thinking they will be learning a set group of rules or a bounded amount of information. It is somewhat of a rude awakening for them to realize this is not the case. I ground my class on the needs of students, yet I base my class on a type of meaning making—and the negotiation of this meaning making in particular social contexts. For example, in my English 420 class, Business Writing, I situate students within a service-learning environment where they must work directly with real-world clients and provide business documents for this client. The information I give them in class—before the service-learning project—may or may not relate directly to each of their service learning demands. Consequently, they are forced to use critical thinking skills to develop strong communication between their group members and their clients, between their group and me, and between themselves in applying what they are learning in class.

It is important to me that I meet the needs of my students, even though their needs and learning styles vary greatly. To this end, I begin with a questionnaire, asking each student what he/she wants to learn. Additionally, I submit and collect at least two anonymous feedback forms throughout the semester, and I apply the feedback I get from these students. Consequently, they see that I do listen and am concerned with their feelings and needs. While it is never possible to please all the students, active listening and responding on my part helps build a strong relationship with my students. I also address various types of learning styles in my teaching. For example, when explaining plagiarism, I ask my students to write an anonymous response about plagiarism: I ask them to define it, share their experiences, and list any questions. I then have them blog, with their peers, sharing some ideas, etc. I next have them get into groups and come up with 3-5 questions or concerns about plagiarism, which they write on the board. As each individual group shares with the class, their peers and I offer feedback and possible solutions to their questions and concerns.

I like to think that I help my students to use and apply critical thinking skills, use guidelines as guidelines and not as rules, and communicate more easily with others and ask questions. I also like to think that my students end up more open to writing and communicating. I tell them: This is not the end; it is just the beginning!

¹ Berlin, James A. "Poststructuralism, Cultured Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice." *Professing the New Rhetoric*. Ed. Theresa Enos and Stuart C. Brown. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994. 461-480.