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Teaching Philosophy
ESL / Writing Center

When I first began my graduate work for my MFA, I felt I knew far too little about what students needed and wanted regarding their learning, so I began working as a volunteer tutor in the writing center. While this experience did help me to become a better instructor, it also grounded me in the remarkable value of working one-on-one with students. I was completely sold on how such individual teaching and tutoring expanded classroom work. Later, in working through my doctoral work at Purdue where we were required to have individual conferences once a week with our first-year students, this one-on-one situation proved a way to cement the student-instructor academic relationship.

I have continued this mode of ‘teaching’ in all of my classes, setting aside one-on-one time for every student. For example, in teaching an ESL reading and writing course this summer, I set aside one day where I meet with each student for twenty minutes. While I present a classroom environment that offers a safe place for my students, individual meetings allow for a space where the L2 student can ask me questions that we did not have time for, in class, or talk with me about concerns that the student was unsure of in class. Additionally, by spending individual time with each student discussing academic progress, concerns, etc. I am able to tailor the students’ learning levels more easily by getting to know them better and providing more scaffolding for them.

Expecting L2 students to manage second-language issues and new academic discourse requirements as we do L1 students is problematic, and I use a type of scaffolding in my style of classroom teaching for ESL students. In teaching professional business writing to a class with students from China, Indonesia, Turkey, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Greece, and other countries, I developed a three-stage teaching approach that has been successful: The students have been receptive and the learning outcomes have been high.

- First, I begin by presenting a prompt related to our focus/reading to which each student, individually, responds with a free-write. During this time, I do not wander the room, as this can make them feel nervous. Instead, I make sure I am working on giving them written feedback on their homework, etc.
- Second, I then have them work in groups of four to five students where they use their freewrite as a way to share information and develop an in-depth conversation about our topic. During this time, I make sure to ‘visit’ each group for a time, listen, perhaps enter into the conversation, and give encouragement.
- From this point, I have them write on the board, in their groups, their ideas and summations. Because they are all using a section of the board, no one feels overly awkward. Everyone is in the same situation, and there is often a great deal of talking and laughing.
- Third, this leads us to a whole-class discussion. Considering that every individual has a different learning style, level of understanding, and communicating, classroom teaching can ‘lose’ an individual. Combining classroom teaching with individual consultations strengthens both student learning and instructor teaching. Additionally, during one-on-one times with students, I can remind them of points they made, issues their group discussed, etc. to encourage conference discussions.

In working in the writing lab at Purdue, receiving requests from individual L2 students for one-on-one academic help, and teaching a classroom with students from multiple countries, I noticed a gap in resources and teaching tools for L2 students. Consequently, I began ‘visiting’ professors from various departments on my own time, talking with them about what types of documents they require, what type of writing they look for, etc. The culmination of my concerns and research led me to address the needs of second-language graduate students as they struggle with communication issues, due to cultural differences, in working with their dissertation advisors – in my own dissertation. While ESL/WAC workshops for faculty are valuable, I see a more integrated approach as being a better option. One

possibility is to have various faculty members, individually and from various disciplines, speak about their fields (writing, discourse, focus, in addition to perspectives and movements expected within the field) to ESL students and have ESL students ask questions of the faculty. Showing faculty that we value their specific academic discourse perspectives and requirements would advance a successful and positive working between ESL/writing center departments and faculty. Additionally, in preparing such a project, visiting faculty, one-on-one, to discuss difficulties they observe in their classrooms in working with ESL students would show faculty that we, as ESL coordinators, care about their perspectives and teaching.

Having spent two summers in two different countries, and having learned to interact with local store/market owners where I needed to learn at least the basic of the language, I have developed a high level of respect and admiration for ESL students. In teaching a professional business writing course to two classes, one L1 and the other L2, I would always tell the L1 class that they should come to the service-learning project client presentation to see their international peers: Students from our country, unfortunately, have little knowledge of the motivation and capabilities of our L2 students.

I have been lucky enough to teach students from Purdue University, where the students were in the classroom far before they were due; students from Western Michigan University, where I learned the impact of students homesickness on academic outcomes; Henry Ford Community College, where I nearly had to dance and jump in front of the room to get ESL students to laugh and, consequently, open up; and Northern Michigan University, where a growing desire to invite and work with international students is coming to fruition. Teaching is my life. Working with and tutoring students is my life. When I am working with students, time stops, and the teaching moments are wonderful.