

March 1995

The “Real World” & the Classroom

Thinking and Writing

As much as we might sometimes wish otherwise, the classroom is not always a space to which students and teachers can retreat from the pressures and disturbances of outside life. Indeed, an effective classroom learning environment can sometimes be disrupted by factors completely beyond a TA's control: the serious illness or death of a student, incidents of violence, racial tensions on campus, or political protests. What should a TA do when seemingly extraneous matters start to affect learning and teaching in the classroom?

TAs should realize that neither they nor their students can be expected to leave the outside world completely behind them when they enter the classroom. Pretending to do so by ignoring the fact that students are disturbed or upset is not necessarily the best tactic, even if it seems the easiest. This may be particularly true when something terribly traumatic happens to your students—the suicide of a classmate or friend, to take an especially tragic example. In this case, a TA must be acutely sensitive to the feelings and needs of the students. If some students want to talk about this issue—about their friend, about the pressures on undergraduates, about what we as a community can do to help prevent such tragedies—you can use your classroom as a place to foster a dialogue that can be of help to grieving students. Falling behind on your syllabus for a week is a minor inconvenience compared to the possible benefits to your students in seeing their classroom as a safe place for honest discussion—and seeing you as caring enough to give them that opportunity. A TA, of course, would never want to force a discussion among students who don't want one, and in a large lecture class where not all the students know each other this kind of informal discussion might not be appropriate. If in doubt, ask your students what they would like to do.

Other events that might disrupt your students' readiness to learn can be more controversial: student protests, for instance. But here, too, class time spent discussing the issues involved is not necessarily wasted time. If you can relate these issues to the

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It is easy to feel helpless when it comes to teaching writing, especially if you happen to collect a batch of poor essays from your students. You may feel obligated to spend class time on writing problems, yet you have a lot of material to cover and aren't sure how you can find the time. Torn between the sense of a duty to address writing and the responsibility to cover the subject matter of a course, many TAs understandably choose to ignore the issue of writing out of respect for their disciplinary obligations.

Teachers can and should, however, reconsider the implicit opposition of “writing” and “subject matter,” or form and content, that underlies this way of thinking. If you think of your students' writing as an integral part of their process of mastering the subject matter, then your time spent talking about writing (form) directly serves your goal of teaching a subject (content). Writing should be

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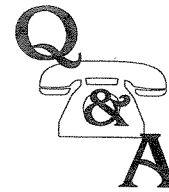
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subject matter of your course—history, sociology, politics, psychology—so much the better, for you demonstrate how your course subject or methodology bears on the "real world." But even if you cannot, your students might find a brief discussion of important events in their lives to be helpful. Again, it shows that you are interested in them as individuals with lives outside of your classroom, and it gives them an opportunity to share their thoughts in a positive, nonthreatening setting. The danger here, of course, is of losing control of your class, especially if it is dealing with a highly charged emotional issue. Through your own example and through discussion guidelines, you can encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance of each others' thoughts and perspectives. If necessary, remind your students that a university classroom is a place for reasonable, intelligent, and

frank discussion, and not a place for abusive language, name-calling, or threats.

TAs should consider their own role in the discussion, whether to participate actively and state at the beginning their personal opinion on a topic or to act as a moderator, a medium through which students may test their ideas. Some TAs prefer the "honest" approach, revealing their opinion to the students at the onset. They feel that their willingness to state their own position gives students the courage to state theirs. Others fear, however, that by revealing their own bias, students may be less willing to offer differing opinions, so they prefer to play the role of "devil's advocate."

It goes without saying that you don't want to turn your class period into a weekly town meeting on current events, and some of your students no doubt will be eager to direct their attention to the subject matter of the class. The best policy is to be both flexible and moderate. Be willing to lead a brief discussion if your students have things they want to say, and if you feel that such a discussion would be helpful to them, but then be firm about turning the attention of your class to the academic matters at hand.



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I'm ten years older than my students, but I don't look it. I like joking around and being on friendly terms with my students, but I think I'm losing the ability to command their attention and respect. How can I have a relaxed, informal classroom atmosphere and still maintain the authority that I need to manage my class?

You will only be able to combine the class atmosphere that you want with an effective learning environment if you establish clear boundaries over behavior at the start. You are the teacher, and while this doesn't mean that you know everything and have all the answers, it does mean that you are responsible for guiding your students, facilitating and directing their learning. This might mean starting your semester authoritatively enough that your students know to respect you as their leader in an intellectual project.

Consider dressing more formally, especially at the beginning of the semester, than your students in order to emphasize your different roles. Similarly, have your students address you by your last name rather than your first. Remember that classes usually become more informal as the semester progresses and TA and students feel more comfortable with each other; by beginning more formally, you will be able to ease up a bit later without losing control.

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Thinking and Writing

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seen as a *process* that facilitates your students' understanding of complex material—not just an end product that reveals or demonstrates already-won understanding.

It is always best to address writing problems by working with the students' own writing. For example, you might collect rough drafts of an assignment. Pick one or two representative papers, photocopy them (with names removed), and devote a class period to discussing them. With a little guidance, students are often quite good at seeing the strengths and weaknesses of their peers' essays. This type of exercise enables you to show students that *what* they argue in a paper cannot be divorced from *how* they argue it. That is, form and content are not separable. You can't talk about whether a paragraph possesses formal coherency, or whether an argument or an essay has a valid conclusion without also addressing questions of comprehension and analysis.

Even a discussion of sentence-level errors can raise issues of content. Take that frequent error of basic writers, the comma splice. Two simple sentences spliced together with a comma differ from a

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NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

BEYOND TYPES

This column has regularly discussed different types of students—i.e., student athletes, first-year students, students with disabilities, non-traditional students—in order to suggest ways for TAs to work more effectively with them. By exploring the common needs of students in specific groups, we are able to develop more effective ways to ease their way through the university. Teachers who care about their students are sensitive to and work to meet the special needs of all their students, and, to this end, such categories can be useful.

As educators, however, we must guard against a tendency to see only parts of our students, rather than the whole, living person. It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing all students merely as representatives of one group or other. Although this may give the teacher a sense of more control, a feeling of security that she or he understands the students in the class and thus can work to their best benefit, it is useful occasionally to step back from these defining categories and reflect upon the student as an individual.

Is it really possible to resist such categorizing? Although it is possible, it may at first be difficult. People are generally more comfortable when they

can identify, name, and place a thing in its appropriate pigeonhole. Unfortunately, for some, the act of identification and classification negates the need to think any more about a topic.

How can we use our knowledge about the special needs of people while still respecting their integrity as individuals? Perhaps most importantly we must remember that, no matter how well-intentioned our reason for devising them, all categories—i.e., fraternity member, athlete, adult learner—are reductive and describe only one part of what is inevitably a complex and unique being. Labels may sometimes be helpful in *guiding* us in working with students, but there are definite limits to what they can tell us; they should never blind us to the real person. By remaining open-minded, we provide ourselves with the opportunity to be surprised, delighted, and, most importantly, educated by our students as they reveal themselves to us.

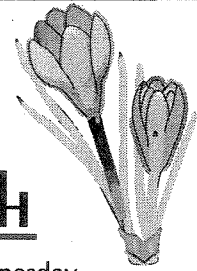
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sentence with a subordinate clause not just on the level of syntax: the more complex syntax of the latter carries with it a more complex order of thinking, in which ideas are not just placed side-by-side but arranged in a hierarchical or cause-and-effect relationship. By thinking about how the simple ideas in a comma splice can be placed in relationship to each other, your students are doing more than a grammar exercise; they are thinking about how the intellectual ideas and concepts they are working with in your course are related to each other.

Obviously, it is best to discuss drafts of an essay assignment that your students still have time to work on, for then they can return to their own drafts with a fuller understanding of the intellectual issues that you are asking them to address, and with a clearer sense of what makes for a good essay. As the instructor, you are rewarded with papers that have a good chance of being substantially better—both in form and content—than what you otherwise would have to grade.



MARCH

- 1 Ash Wednesday
- 2 Idul-Fitr (End of Ramadan)
Tibetan New Year
- 6 Beginning of Great Lent
(Eastern Orthodox
Christian)
- 12 Spring recess begins
- 19 Spring recess ends
- 17 St. Patrick's Day
- 20-21 Baha'i New Year
- 21 Vernal Equinox

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