**UMass Boston Pedagogy Guide for New Instructors in Courses that Assign and Assess Writing**

**Judith Goleman**

**English Department**

**Office for Faculty Development**

**Effective Teaching Principle #1:**

**Elements that an instructor wants to end up with (eg. analytical or argumentative essays) need to be practiced in some form from the very start.** (Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, 11)

**Suggested Practices:**

* In your syllabus, name the ways you will assess students and suggest the processes students should use in their daily preparation. Students do not always recognize that preparing for writing-based assessment requires different forms of studying than preparing to take objective tests. Use and refer to your recommended processes often.
* Through specific assignments connected to course readings, ask students to practice the critical reading, writing and thinking moves that they will need to have in place for their assessments.
  + For example, you might require students to highlight significant passages from their readings and to comment on them in the margins. (You do not need to read these closely; you can glance at them quickly in a walk around before class and use a homework sign up sheet for giving credit.)
  + You can ask students to use the last 5-10 minutes of class to synthesize a lecture or discussion by asking a focused question that requires them *to practice* the kinds of moves needed for understanding, eg. summary, comparison, relating examples to concepts, articulating cause and effect, sorting and categorizing data, etc. Name the move you are asking students to make. This helps students to think about their thinking and to notice the discourse conventions of your discipline. It should not be taken for granted that all students will figure this out for themselves.
  + Collect these syntheses and skim to get a sense of what your students are able to do; find a few that represent good examples, type and distribute them. Models are especially helpful to ESL students.

**Effective Teaching Principle #2: Because writers figure out what they are trying to say *by writing*, essay assignments should include a process for drafting and revising. (You do not want students to turn in first drafts under any circumstances and the following practices make it difficult for them to do so.)**

**Suggested Practices:**

* Writing Assignments should be put in writing and discussed in class to help students see and analyze the parts.
* Time may be given to planning, drafting and revising (just as time is given in exam courses for reviews and developing study guides).
  + One-page planning notes for papers can be assigned and discussed in 5-minute conferences on a day when class is cancelled in order to hold these meetings.
  + Complete drafts may be required for a peer review day when students exchange papers and fill out a specific questionnaire that enables them to analyze the parts of the paper and to make suggestions based on their analyses.
  + Students can then go forward to prepare their final drafts for teacher review and may be asked to explain in a comment what they revised and why.
  + Incentives may be developed for participating in the drafting process (it needs to count); for example, students who engage in the whole process may be permitted to revise for a new grade after teacher review or students who do not participate in the whole process have the grade of the final paper reduced, etc.

**Effective Teaching Principle #3: Responding to student writing should be selective and focused on the major criteria named in the assignment and peer review.**

**Effective Teaching Principle #4: Editing or marking all sentence level errors has limited effects and can even be counter-productive.**

**Suggested Practices for #3 and #4:**

* Read a student paper once without marking it. Read generously for the sense it makes.
* On a second reading, make 3- 5 comments that point out both areas of strength and areas of weakness. In the case of a weak paper, explain or ask questions to point out a couple of sections that represent *root* problems. (You need not comment on all the ramifications of these problems across the paper; this is time-consuming and often leads to diminishing returns as students may feel overwhelmed.)
* In particularly problematic essays, bracket a couple of sections and ask a student to try to rework them in relation to your comments or questions. The student should meet with you to review the revisions. (Selective revision of discrete sections is more manageable for students and teachers and is often more meaningful too.)
* Where a student is making many sentence-level errors, point out 1 or 2 of the most significant and then ask the student to meet with you or make an appointment at the writing center to work on reducing these particular errors. Be selective and aim at helping a student to notice and reduce a couple major errors at a time.
* Another approach to error reduction is to ask all students to proofread their papers line by line in class on the day a paper is due and to correcttheerrors they notice with a pen. Ask students to count their errors and add them up in class. The necessity of proofreading for error is dramatized this way because the class total offers students a teacher’s perspective that they do not otherwise see.
* On the day when papers are returned, spend time with sample essays or excerpts from essays (anonymously) that represent some success with aspects of the assignment that you found yourself commenting on frequently. ESL students are especially helped by seeing examples.

**Effective Teaching Principle #5: In classes where writing is the major means of assessment and processes have been built into the course for developing writing capacity, the absence policy and homework policy need to support and reflect these goals.**

**Suggested Practices:**

* Ungraded homework needs to count in order to underscore the importance of participating in the learning processes structured into the course. For example, the syllabus might stipulate that students who do not successfully complete 60% of ungraded work will not qualify for a C- and students who do not successfully complete 80% of ungraded work will not qualify for a B- or higher. Alternatively, a point system may be used.
* Maximum allowable absences may be stated on the syllabus and chronic lateness to class may have consequences.
* Instructors may want to exercise some flexibility toward students who explain why they are having difficulty conforming to course policies. It is useful to draw up a specific plan with students for how they can get back on track.
* When students are not able to get back on track and to engage in the course as it has been planned, instructors have the right and responsibility to explain this to them. Students with problems that make it impossible for them to take the course as it has been planned may be referred to the Advising Center or to college-specific professional advisors for sorting out their issues and obstacles to success.

**Effective Teaching Principle #6: Students learn to write in a discipline through incremental and recursive opportunities to put their thoughts into writing and benefit from a chance to reflect on the results of their processes at the end of a course.**

**Suggested Practices:**

* Students may be asked to save all their work in a folder. At term’s end, ask students to re-read the course syllabus along with the work in their folders and to say what stands out about their development. You do not need to collect the folders.
* Alternatively, one can ask students to select 3 items from their folder that they think represent the goals in the syllabus and to explain their selections in a brief cover letter to the instructor.