

My main topic or focus is not writing but learning. But I will show a big role for writing as a way to enhance learning. Nor is my topic “student centered” teaching. The term “student-centered” seems to imply that the teacher must relinquish authority. In fact, the kind of teaching that I’m interested in takes a great deal of teacher authority.

I will explore two important ways to make our teaching learning centered:

(1) Conveying concepts through experiences. “Concept labs.” We cannot hand someone an idea or a concept the way we can hand them a brick (Dewey’s point). People only get ideas or concepts if they *create* them out of experiences. So if we want students to have certain ideas or concepts, we have to build situations (like labs) that create experiences in students so they actually learn. It’s *possible* to give a lecture that creates a real experience for learning, but it’s pretty rare and difficult. That’s why lecturing tends to produce superficial short-lived learning that doesn’t really last or affect how students think. I want to suggest some ways to create learning experiences. We could call them concept labs.

• Low stakes “writing to learn.” Freewriting. Exploring ideas *actively* through one’s own language and on one’s own. Usually nongraded.

• Workshop activities designed to teach a specific concept.

• Working in pairs or small groups.

• Reading a text out loud in such a way that the meaning is clear to someone who’s never read it and doesn’t have a copy. When students read aloud with felt meaning, they are putting meaning *into their voice*—which means, really, that they are putting the meaning into their physical bodies. They have to embody the concepts.

• Improving problem-solving and meta-cognitive thinking through exploring “movies of the mind”: verbal accounts of all the mental events going on as they try to solve the problem.

(2) Reducing the adversarial or resentful relationship between student and teacher—particularly around grading. Because we make students do so many things and also grade them, students often resent teachers and feel they are not respected. And teachers have been known to resent students. These dynamics undermine teaching and learning. Here are some suggestions:

• Nongraded activities. All kinds of activities can be assigned while not graded—and not just freewriting or writing to learn. (An important principle: It’s not against the law to require work that we don’t grade. Or if necessary, we can grade it: 100 for doing it, 0 for not doing it.)

• Respond to student writing (and other work) in ways that reduce the adversarial dynamic:

– Build drafts-and-revisions into your assignment calendar. Use most of your responding time for drafts. This way your feedback helps them make it better instead of being just an autopsy.

– On final drafts, respond quickly with *multi-dimensional* grids. A *one-dimensional* grade cannot validly or reliably represent the quality of a multidimensional performance. Single-dimensional grades are inevitably skewed and unfair because different readers give different weights to different dimensions of the paper (such as original thinking vs. organization vs. mechanics).

– If we want students to listen better to our feedback or response, give it in the voice of a human reader rather than as an impersonal/God/authority judge. Instead of “Unclear,” try “I get lost.” Instead of “Awkward,” try “I stumble.” Instead of “Bad reasoning,” try “I can’t see your logic.”

– Give feedback on weaknesses by finding proto-strengths. E.g., “Your organization is weak. I’ve marked some bits of organization or almost-organization in your paper. Do more of this kind of thing.”

• Find occasions for students to read low stakes and high stakes writing aloud to each other in small groups. This undercuts their feeling that they write only to you, the grader. Reading aloud is more important than peer response (which takes lots of time and training). The quickest most reliable learning comes from reading to a listener and feeling the words in your mouth and hearing them in your ear. If your class is not a writing class, don’t feel guilty if you want to skip peer response.

• Use grading contracts to reduce the adversarial feelings that grow up around grading—and to make evaluative feedback more healthy and productive.

• If there’s time, have students get feedback from peers—so the teacher isn’t the only person giving feedback. (It’s quicker with pairs than small groups; it can be assigned for homework; it can be required but not graded.)