

Is Teaching Writing Still Possible?

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To ask, as I have in the title, “Is Teaching Writing Still Possible?” seems to make people nervous. Perhaps, then, I should begin by explaining that I adapted this title from an essay by composition scholar Ann Berthoff that was called “Is Teaching Still Possible?” Berthoff wrote her essay in 1984 to express her dissatisfaction with a paradigm for teaching that she found rigid and mechanistic, and that she labeled, ironically, a “pedagogy of exhortation.” With such a pedagogy, teachers become cheerleaders, urging or entreating students to “get a thesis!”; “provide three points of evidence”; “use transitions”; “find your own voice!” As we have all probably learned from experience, however, exhortation is not effective teaching. Berthoff seeks to replace the pedagogy of exhortation with a “pedagogy of knowing.” This pedagogy takes as its central principle the idea that language is a means of making meaning; thus, in the classroom, exploration and meaning must be our focus. Our assignments, she insists, should not be mere topics; instead, they should make students aware of their own thinking and become opportunities for them to discover their minds in action (342). In other words, writing is not a formula or a series of exercises that can be drilled and corrected; it is an unruly activity at the center of the educational process.

As you can see from my summary, Berthoff defined the constraints on teaching as pedagogical. This is a hopeful vision: if we adjust teachers’ perspectives, it suggests, students will learn to write. I imagine, however, that many of you would define the constraints on your teaching quite differently from Berthoff. Perhaps we are now in a different era of teaching, an era that requires new answers to the question “Is Teaching Still Possible?” and, in particular, to the question “Is Teaching *Writing* Still Possible?” Whether you teach high school or college, you would probably say that it is challenging to teach writing in an era when students do not read, when popular culture—television, movies, video

games, the Web—have displaced literary culture; when classes are becoming ever larger; when, if you teach high school, standardized testing and more limiting curriculum requirements can determine not only what you teach, but how you teach writing. Thus, it appears that the answer to the question “Is Teaching Writing Still Possible?” may now be “no.”

To begin to think ourselves out of this dead end, I would like to suggest that the answer to the question of my title may depend on what we mean by “writing.” And about this, there is much disagreement. Recently, for instance, I read a fascinating exchange on a web site called Slashdot, which advertises that it provides “news for nerds,” in which a writing instructor from a small college invited engineers to reflect on what they think engineering students need to know about writing and what “experiences, practices, and pressures” as professional engineers have made them better writers. The range of responses should not have been surprising. The exchange began with discussion of the need for a new “grammar system.” Eventually, someone went out on a limb in support of directness and clarity; apparently, this is not what he thinks we teach. A few people offered opinions about process: write randomly and then rearrange later; or the opposite: never write unless your ideas as clear as they are when you write computer code. My favorite entry cleverly compared writing to an engineering problem and concluded this way: “One of the biggest problems with teaching people to write is getting them to read what they have written, think about it, and rewrite it until it does what they wanted it to.” The writer then concludes: “Here, at least, engineers should have a head start over most students, insofar as they are used to the fact that your first stab at a design is almost never viable” (“Teaching Engineers”). I like this contribution because this writer recognizes that writing is supposed to *accomplish* something and that revision redesigns writing, rebuilds the machine, to make sure it performs its task well. Despite this moment, the discussion on the whole was confusing because few of the respondents meant the same thing by writing. While this conversation was probably maddening to the professor who wrote asking for advice, there are ways in which there is not as much difference as we would like to think between the problems engineers run into when they trade opinions on teaching writing and when we do.

One of the problems that divides high school writing teachers and those at colleges and universities is that we, too, tend to mean quite different things by the word “writing” and this, inevitably, makes the conversation about college preparatory writing and college writing confusing and difficult. I would like to help demystify what my university colleagues and I mean when we talk about college writing. I believe we will be closer to bridging the divide between high school and college writing if we learn more about each others’ educational goals and also if we are willing to consider those goals within the context of the vastly different institutional structures in which we work.

Before I dig into the details here, I must take a moment to explain the perspective and experience I bring to the conversation about teaching writing and offer a brief professional biography. I began my teaching career in a public high school in eastern Connecticut, where I taught ninth and eleventh grades for three years. The district was poor and rural, and I received a quick education in how institutions, settings, and budgets shape how and what you can do in the classroom. Later I earned my Ph.D. in English and afterward took a job teaching at Raritan Valley Community College, where I taught *a lot* of composition. While on the faculty at Raritan for three years, I participated in a fantastic teaching exchange with Rutgers, and had the chance to be trained and to teach in the Writing Program there. I left Raritan to work full-time administrating in the Rutgers Writing Program, where one of my responsibilities was to develop a course to serve transfer students from the community colleges. After two years, however, professional wanderlust hit again, and I took a position as Associate Director of the newly created Princeton Writing Program. It was impossible to resist the opportunity to participate in building a Writing Program from the ground up in a setting that seemed ideal—a generous budget, a staff of full-time writing instructors, twelve students per class. After three years at Princeton, however, I decided to move back to Rutgers, this time to a faculty position in the English Department, where I am now. The point of this little biographical interlude is to demonstrate that my teaching career has spanned from public high school to public community college to mid-size private university to large public university. It seems fair to say that, at this point, I have met the full range of students that it is possible to meet in the northeast, and I have worked within an unusually wide range of institutions.

All of this gives me a unique perspective on what the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently labeled the “perception gap”—the gap between what professors and high school teachers think students need to know to be prepared for college. This past March, the *Chronicle* published results from companion national surveys of college faculty members and high school teachers, which found that they differ markedly in their perceptions of students’ preparedness. I will give you the worst news first: their judgments are most widely divergent with regard to students’ writing and reading abilities.

Students' Preparation for College-Level Demands
Chronicle of Higher Education, March 2006

	Not well prepared	Somewhat well prepared	Very well prepared	Don't know	
Oral communication	14%	55%	26%	5%	High school
	18%	64%	15%	3%	College
Science	8%	44%	38%	11%	High school
	20%	32%	5%	42%	College
Mathematics	9%	46%	37%	7%	High school
	32%	32%	4%	32%	College
Writing	10%	49%	36%	4%	High school
	44%	47%	6%	3%	College
Reading/ understanding difficult materials	15%	56%	26%	3%	High school
	41%	48%	10%	2%	College
Study habits (organization, planning)	30%	53%	15%	2%	High school
	41%	50%	7%	2%	College
Motivation to work hard	27%	54%	17%	2%	High school
	29%	50%	20%	1%	College
Ability to seek and use support resources	19%	54%	23%	4%	High school
	26%	55%	12%	6%	College
Research skills	18%	53%	26%	3%	High school
	49%	42%	4%	6%	College

As you can see in this chart from the *Chronicle's* surveys, 44 percent of college faculty responded that students were “not well prepared” in writing, compared to 10 percent of high school faculty. In addition, 41 percent of college faculty stated that students were “not well prepared” in reading and understanding difficult materials, compared to 15 percent of high school faculty. Strangely, the opening of the *Chronicle's* report focuses primarily on the perception gap concerning writing and says very little about the comparable gap regarding reading. I believe the writing and reading problems are fundamentally linked. These skills are

deeply interconnected in college classes, a point I will return to soon, so a deficiency in one is naturally paired to a deficiency in the other.

Another significant gap exists in the amount of writing students are expected to produce.

Academic Requirements in a Typical Class
Chronicle of Higher Education, March 2006

	Never	Less than once a month	A few times a month	Weekly or more often
Write a 1- to 5-page paper				
High school	19%	48%	24%	9%
College	16%	44%	32%	8%
Write a paper of more than 5 pages				
High school	61%	37%	2%	0%
College	28%	67%	5%	0%
Analyze basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory				
High school	2%	12%	30%	56%
College	2%	10%	26%	63%

According to the surveys, over 70 percent of college professors expect their students occasionally to write essays of 5 or more pages, in contrast to 39 percent of high school teachers. To be honest, I am surprised this gap is not larger. In my experience, the primary mode of evaluation in classes in the humanities and social sciences is writing—both essays and exams. The *Chronicle* reports, for instance, that “fifty-four percent of high school teachers in the social sciences and history never require papers of more than five pages, as compared with just 13 percent of [college] faculty members in those academic areas.” College writing, in other words, is not only a concern in English classes. College students will be asked to write about many things, but unless they become English majors (which few of them will), most of their essays will not be about literature. I should also say that few college faculty members whom I have met over the years (other than composition instructors) offer their students much in the way of direct writing instruction. I am not condoning this, but students need to know that, as adult learners, they will be expected independently to develop the skills involved in writing in their majors.

What are the consequences of these gaps in perception and practice? The *Chronicle* report does not answer that question, but we can find it instead in a 2003 report from the Stanford University Bridge Project, depressingly titled

“Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations.” This report studies six states, *not* including New Jersey, and finds that far too many students enter college unprepared. In the six states it examines, California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Oregon, Texas, approximately half of students entering college are required to take remedial courses —40 percent at four-year institutions and 63 percent at two-year institutions (8). The report also focuses on college attrition rates as an indicator of weak preparedness. It finds that approximately half of first-year students at community colleges do not continue into the second year, while about one quarter of first-year students at four-year colleges do not continue into the second year (9). The depressing statistics keep coming: “Over 40 percent of college students who earn more than 10 credits never complete a two-year or a four-year degree. At two-year colleges, over 70 percent of students who enroll say they expect to obtain a bachelor’s degree, but only 23 percent receive one” (9). The report concludes that: “While student finances are very important, the intensity and quality of the secondary school curriculum is *the best predictor* of whether a student will go on to complete a bachelor’s degree” (9, emphasis added).

There is no easy way to prepare students for college, but one part of a better future, the *Chronicle* and Stanford reports agree, is better communication between high schools and colleges. I would like to take one step toward that today by offering a few essential pieces of information about writing in college. Please note: In giving this description of how writing is defined in many colleges, I am not saying this is what should be taught in high schools. My goal is not to give the final answer to the question of how to create a better transition to college writing, but rather to open that question to more informed investigation.

So, here are three essential points about writing in college:

- Students will be expected to write in all disciplines, and a significant part of their grades may be based on their writing—papers and exams.
- College writing frequently requires students to write about lengthy and challenging texts. Students do not just read textbooks, but also scholarly articles and books written for general and expert readers.
- College writing generally involves making arguments, taking positions, developing coherent intellectual projects.

The best way to clarify still further what college writing can be is for us to look at some actual assignments and some student writing. For many years, at the end of my composition classes, I have asked students to bring in sample assignments from other classes that they are taking so that we can have a conversation about writing after first-year composition. I want to be sure they are making the

connections between what I have taught them and what they are doing in other classes. Here are some of the assignments they have contributed, which will give you a sense of the reading, thinking, and writing skills students are expected to exercise in college classes:¹

1. From an introductory Psychology class:

You are the head of the Institutional Review Board at the university, and you must decide whether or not to approve the Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson and Miller (1992) experiment. What factors would influence your decision? You must weigh the potential harm to participants against the usefulness and value of the research. What would you suggest be changed in order to make the experiment less stressful (and more ethical) for participants?

2. From a class on the United States and World Affairs:

The character of the so-called American Empire is a contentious issue among historians. To what extent did the United States create a “formal” and/or “informal” empire over the course of the first half of the twentieth century? (Include in your essay definitions of “formal” and “informal” empire.) (6-8 page concise essay) (Miles)

3. For a Religion course on Christian Ethics and Modern Society:

The principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social thought often is used to express the idea that the state should not assume tasks which other communities can perform for themselves. Consider the application of this principle in relation to either 1) the case of public education or 2) the devolution of social services from the federal government to “faith-based” charities. Does subsidiarity promote or reject the privatization of education or social services? (Gregory)

4. From a Japanese History mid-term:

“Japan is a classical democratic political system, with a Constitution, electoral practices and system of political accountability very much in the international mainstream.” Discuss, with relation to Curtis, Drucker, Feldman, Schlesinger, and other course readings.

¹ I regret that I do not have full documentation for most of these assignments. When I collected the assignments, my students handed me photocopies, which often included no information about the professor or course; therefore, I cannot identify all of the authors or even the institutions of origin. For those assignments lacking citation information, I can only say with certainty that they came from undergraduate courses at Rutgers University or Princeton University, between 1999 and 2005.

What can we conclude from looking at these assignments? First I can reiterate:

- Students will be expected to write in all disciplines.
- College writing is often linked to lengthy and challenging readings.
- College writing generally involves making arguments, taking positions, developing coherent projects.

Beyond this, I would like to use these assignments to demonstrate that students are expected to work with sources in the service of *their own* arguments. These assignments require students to engage with texts—not just summarize them—as they work through complex problems, deliberate, and think new thoughts. In the first assignment, for instance, you will notice that one text is the object of analysis – but it is not the object of a *literary* analysis. Rather the student is asked to demonstrate an understanding of the article in the service of an argument about whether it represents ethical research. To write this essay well, the student needs to be able to read for information, methods, and arguments. The second assignment asks students to work with concepts from texts—“formal” and “informal” empire; it requires students to define and use these key terms – and again to do so in the service of their own arguments. The third assignment asks students to apply a theory (subsidiarity) to a case (public education or faith-based charities)—and then asks students to generalize from that case to consider the issue of privatization. The final assignment asks students to evaluate an argument about the Japanese political system using various authors from the course. Here, you might note, the student could choose to write a listing essay, a version of a five-paragraph essay—Curtis says this; Drucker says that—but an unstated part of the assignment, embedded in the ambiguous word “discuss,” is this: that the professor does not simply want a report about what each author would say in response. Instead the professor would prefer an argument that articulates the student’s own position, where she or he uses these authors to confirm, contradict, complicate, or extend that position.

I would love to be able to show you student responses to these assignments, but I do not have copies of the students’ essays for these classes. I can, however, show you a passage from a student paper from one of my first-year writing classes. Here is the assignment:

In this essay you will explore the doctors’ treatments and decisions regarding the epileptic child Lia Lee in Anne Fadiman’s book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. In your essay, use John Stuart Mill’s argument about autonomy and Arthur Kleinman’s ideas about the potentially conflicting explanatory models of

doctors and patients to develop your own argument about the doctors' responses to Lia Lee's case.

Note: the assignment does not tell students how to use the sources, although it points them to key terms such as autonomy and explanatory models. The challenge here is for the students to develop arguments that make connections between an ethnographic narrative, a classic text of nineteenth-century philosophy, and an essay about medical anthropology.

Here is the first paragraph from the essay of a second-semester college freshman. I should say at this point, I have chosen a particularly clear and well-written example of an introduction to illustrate the kind of writing we would *like* to see from our students, and the kind of writing we *hope* students will be able to produce as college writers:

Epileptic seizures are caused by soul loss – by a spirit that catches you, and you fall down. Or at least that is what the Hmong believe. Literally, it is an electrochemical brain storm of uncontrolled neuron firing. But the Hmong have no concept of neurons; they cannot fathom the actual cause of this disease, and so they attribute epilepsy to divine causes. In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman, the doctors caring for Lia Lee, an epileptic Hmong baby, passively assume that western medicine is superior to whatever spiritual explanations the Hmong have for the disease. In effect, they are applying John Stuart Mill's 19th century philosophy to a modern day, complex society. Mill asserted (in a way that is now offensive) that, like children, "backward states of society ... must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury" (4). Mill would approve of interfering with the liberty of the Hmongs. But Mill was a nineteenth century philosopher living in a simpler society; he did not recognize the validity of another culture's rationalization of natural phenomenon (in this specific case, epilepsy). Neil Ernst, one of Lia Lee's doctors, felt justified in effectively taking Lia away from the care of her loving parents when they did not comply with prescribed treatment because he applied Mill's short-sighted philosophy to a complex, multi-cultural society. To handle this complicated situation we need the modern tools provided by Arthur Kleinman in his book *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Although he offers no concrete solutions, Kleinman does not dismiss one culture in favor of another, recognizing the necessity for both cultures to understand each other. He claims that

medical treatment will be best if the two cultures communicate their own understanding of the disease and how it should be treated (117). While the doctors at Lia Lee’s hospital applied Mill’s philosophy to medical ethics, treatment would have been more effective had they considered Arthur Kleinman’s ideas and attempted to listen to the Hmong’s expectations and understanding of Lia’s epilepsy. (“Soul Loss”)

I think this is a very good start to an essay for many reasons. At the beginning, the student demonstrates that she understands a central problem from Fadiman’s text about how the doctors made decisions; she selects a passage from Mill, represents it accurately, and observes that ideas like his about the degree of liberty that should be accorded people from different cultures still have currency in medical practice. This early part of her paragraph clearly sets up the context for her argument. Then she makes an interesting turn and uses Mill’s historical context to suggest why these ideas are problematic in a complex, multicultural society. This was not part of class discussion; she came up with this use of Mill on her own, and in doing so, she takes charge of her own conceptually demanding project. She has noticed a genuine problem about the ethical foundation of the physicians’ decisions that requires further investigation. Thus she turns to Kleinman to help her define an alternative ethical practice. The final sentence identifies the primary goal of her essay—to show her reader that treatment would have been improved if there had been better cross-cultural communication between Lia Lee’s doctors and her family. This introductory paragraph sets up the kind of complex, extended argument many of us want students to be able to make. At the end of the second semester of her freshman year, this student has become a college writer. The question now is how do we get more students to this point? How do we prepare them to make what may seem to be an enormous intellectual leap?

Let me begin to answer by offering a few recommendations from my observations and experience in many different classrooms.

Students need to read more and, in particular, they need to read more non-fiction to be prepared for reading and writing in history, politics, religion, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and other classes. They need to practice reading extended pieces—ten or more pages—of expository prose (not textbook prose) and to practice reading for arguments and concepts. What kinds of readings do I mean? Consider the best non-fiction you run across as fair game – a *New York Times Magazine* article, an essay in the *New Yorker*, a piece on *Slate.com*. One way to bring such texts into classrooms where there is already a set curriculum is for teachers—and not just English teachers—to assign supplementary essays or articles along with literature or textbooks.

Students also need more practice using writing to explore ideas, develop positions, deliberate about problems and paradoxes, make arguments, and think new thoughts about the world. They need to use writing not only to record what they know, but also to discover what they think. When I talk to first-year writing students, they typically tell me (perhaps not entirely accurately) that much of their experience is writing about literature or writing personal essays, neither of which they may do in college at all. They also demonstrate a problematic dependence on the five-paragraph essay, which they recognize they have not used as a vehicle for genuine thought, but more often as a fill-in-the-blank exercise. This standard formula has its use; students learn some lessons about structure by writing five-paragraph essays, and it is certainly the coin of the realm in standardized tests. But students also need to know its limits. It is only one very simple form, and it is typically *not* what college professors mean when they ask for writing.

I have recommended that students should read more non-fiction and that they should practice exploratory writing in which they develop their thinking. Another course of action that reaches beyond the classroom is to create more systematic connections between high schools and universities. This year, for instance, there is a teaching exchange taking place between the New Brunswick Health Sciences Technology High School and the Rutgers Writing Program. Darcy Gioia, Associate Director of the Program, is teaching a non-credit Basic Writing course for a class of seniors at the high school, while David Levine, an English teacher, is teaching Expos 101 for the Rutgers Writing Program. Such exchanges have obvious benefits for both teachers. David reports that he has learned how important it is for his students to get more practice with non-literary reading, and Darcy is so enthusiastic about what her students have learned that her dream is to arrange for the Basic Writing course to be taught by Rutgers instructors in every high school in Middlesex County. As powerful as the experience has been for both of them, the primary benefit has been for the students. Darcy's students are getting a head start thinking about college expectations. One was so proud of what she had learned and the standards to which she was being held that she submitted an essay with Darcy's comments—one that had earned a C+—with a college application; the essay demonstrated that she was developing substantive college-level skills. David's high school AP students like knowing that their teacher is fully aware of what will be expected of them in college, and David has piqued their curiosity by showing students his Expos assignments and samples of Rutgers students' writing. He even asked them to do peer reviews of his Expos papers, after which his students were clearly more confident of their own ability to meet college expectations.

I do not want to be misunderstood as using the example of this teaching exchange to advocate for teaching high school students as if they were already college students; Darcy is not teaching a college course in high school, but rather

a college preparatory course. Instead I would like to use this exchange to demonstrate that when everyone on both sides of the high school/college divide is better informed—teachers, students, and parents—it is much easier to design intellectual bridges to aid the complex process of transition.

Because it is logistically impossible for everyone to participate in an exchange like Darcy's and David's, we need to identify other ways of learning about each others' requirements and expectations. The Stanford report suggests that one way to assist in the transition is for colleges to make their standards and practices public. There is, in fact, a wonderful public resource in the Rutgers Writing Program web site: <<http://wp.rutgers.edu>>. Here you will find information on all the courses the program offers, including detailed grading criteria and sample graded essays in a section called the Gradatorium. You will also find sample assignments and assignment sequences, as well as information about the program's pedagogy. If this web site had been around when I was teaching high school, it would have been required reading for my college-bound students, perhaps for all my students.

It would be wonderful if such information were available from more departments and programs at more colleges and universities. If there were, however—to return to my original point about the differences in how we define writing—you would quickly notice that “college writing” does not mean precisely the same thing at every institution. Each college or university has its own culture and expectations about writing. That certainly complicates the answer to the question of how to prepare students for college writing and perhaps also the question of whether teaching writing is possible. How can we teach *writing* when that term has so many meanings? While I must acknowledge this complication, it is also true that, in my own experience, from Raritan to Rutgers to Princeton, despite the extraordinary institutional differences, the core of my pedagogy has remained the same. Here, in a nutshell, is what I know about preparing students to develop skills in academic writing: in order for students to do the writing and thinking that form the foundation of a college education, they must learn to define genuine, compelling questions, problems, and projects; they must learn to engage with challenging readings and to work with those sources to develop complex, extended arguments; and they must be given opportunities for drafting and deep, substantive revision—revision that demonstrates an understanding that, in the words of the engineer I quoted earlier, the “first stab at a design is almost never viable.” Finally, the practices of drafting and revision must be reinforced by teachers' effective responses.

So, do I think teaching writing is possible? Yes, I do. And it is my hope that the information presented here will help those of you who teach high school to see that preparing students for college writing may not be entirely what you expected, but it, too, is certainly still possible.

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