When the classical composer teaches the class called “Composition” at the college level, she teaches the writing of music. By its very nature, the term suggests the creation of music, the bringing of a piece of music out of nothing. Where there was nothing, a piece of music came into being, existed—fittingly, our first year writing courses take that same title. When we write, we create, even when we happen to be writing for a College Composition course. Even College Composition essays are structures of expression and image and thought, are individual packets of voice and belief and fear and hope, though we have perhaps ceased to recognize this. Writing is a hopeful act. “We write to taste life twice,” says Nin (1975, p. 38). Even the essays put forth in College Composition allow us to be alive again, in a different way, in a separate way, one that more fully examines. To be able to write them, one must be creative. Thus, College Composition is, in my view, a creative writing class.

I teach it as such. I believe in the workshop as an environment structured on the modeling of behaviors and practices, an environment where the educational goal is to acquire said behaviors and practices. Buck et al. (2004) of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) include in their “Guidelines for the Academic Preparation of English Faculty at Two-Year Colleges” that highly effective instructors “[c]enter their classrooms on the student” (p. 4). What pedagogical structure is more student-centered than the workshop?

For the first paper I tell my students: cut the first paragraph, you don’t need it. Cut the last paragraph, you don’t need it. Give me more detail. Place us as readers in the moment. By the second paper, they are telling one another to do it. By the third paper, they are doing it themselves, for their own drafts,
before they even get to class, and for their
own work, without my prompting or the
prompting of their peers. This is how we learn
to write. We teach decision-making. We teach
effective moves, much as one does in chess.
Do this and see where it leads. See for
yourself. And they do see.

As Pekins (2006) says, “This first-year
composition teaching is good work. I like it
down here in the trenches, where I find in my
students' successes my own success” (p. 241).
I believe the teaching of College Composition
at the two-year college is “good work.” I do
not, however, believe I am in the trenches.
My students offer too many genuine gifts to
our shared classroom—and to me—for me to
believe that. There are many gifts that my
students proffer, and I will discuss three of
the most striking and joy-inducing here.

The first is the gift of life experience:

I remember all too well the dire
consequences of assigning description papers
at four-year colleges. Students would
describe their high school graduations or
parties they’d been to. If I was lucky, they’d
been in a car accident. They’d say, I don’t
have anything to write about. They’d say,
nothing has happened to me.

That all changed when I started at
River Valley.

I’ve cried with students as they’ve
written about their burned-down homes and
the loss of everything they owned, the deaths
of their babies during birth, the way that they
stole the drugs off their bunkmates in jail and
as they took the drugs then realized how
pathetic their lives were and so began the
road to recuperation.

I cried with one student as she
described holding her little brother’s hand as
he died of a rare genetic disease. I had a
student who was picking produce at a farm
when the sixteen-year-old boy beside her was
killed by a lightning strike. I have students
who have saved lives as EMTs, birthed babies
as doulas, watched their wives die of cancer.
One student traveled across the country by
hopping freight trains at sixteen years old
while homeless. One wrote about her father
showing up at school after five years of
absence to return the jacket left behind all
those years before, which had since grown far
too small, only to disappear again, this time
for good. When they write their voice essays,
letters meant to shift the focus away from the
classroom and into their lives, my students
write to their alcoholic fathers who beat them,
to their newly diagnosed multiple sclerosis,
to rivers, to God, to their former selves who
were addicted to drugs. They write to the
mothers and fathers who loved them and
saved their lives. They write to the mothers
and fathers who abandoned them and
destroyed them.
Two: The gift of the learning curve.

Almost every single student comes into my classroom believing they cannot write. They come in hating writing because they believe it is a thing they cannot do. They come in having already been conquered by teachers who have told them they will never succeed.

As we move forward together, they begin to see that every paper has its strengths. Often, they realize that they have much to say, and that if they put a little effort in, they can even say it well. Under the encouragement and guidance of our small and safe writing community, they learn first to love coming to our class and sharing their experiences. They learn to love talking about the writings of others. They learn to be excited about the idea of revision. Through all of this, they learn to love writing.

Not only that. They get better at it. They pay attention when we talk about the toolbox for each assignment and take it seriously when we brainstorm. They are amazed by what comes out of their pens. They grow encouraged and tap into their great creative resources—and their creative resources are great. And by the end of the semester they are working on excellent essays, essays they can be proud of, essays I am proud of, essays which they often share with the college at our Student Open Readings. This is tied in to the lives they have lived. They have suffered and they have loved and then understood that this creates an emotional biome in them. They understand as they begin to write how much is dammed up, and how the writing can engineer a release, can shift their perspectives, can help them see what they have lived and how they might be freed of it in new ways.

“[T]wo-year college teacher-scholars of the twenty-first century must do more than understand diversity—they must value it,” say Buck et al. (2004, p. 9). This is one of the kinds of diversity they mean: diversity of experience, of educational confidence, of academic faith, in background and ability. Some students come to me as strong writers already. Some of them come to me as less confident and less experienced writers. All leave with the realization that writing is at least as much about work as it is about talent, and with faith in their ability to do this work. All leave with the realization that writing is about their lives and their experiences and their expressions, their joys and their pains, and not about a textbook and a classroom and an assignment and a grade.

Which brings me to my third gift, the gift of changed lives.

When my four-year college students walked out of my classroom, they had often accomplished several things. They had
pledged a sorority or fraternity, they had gotten a class out of the way, they had grown another few months older, in age anyway.

My two-year college students gain in maturity, ability, and world view, maybe because they are fully invested, maybe because they had so much room to grow, maybe because they were ready in a way few others are. Maybe the cross-pollination of being in a classroom where even a few students understand that their lives depend on this educational opportunity makes it happen. Maybe it is, then, a form of contagion. Whatever it is, my students are changed. Their minds are broadened. Their skills are sharpened, their lives are transformed. They walk out of my classroom and back out into that rural New Hampshire mountain town and they see things differently. They believe in themselves. They are given a new sense of faith in the world and what it has to offer. Often, they head off to four-year institutions and come back to say they don’t feel as challenged as they did at River Valley, that they know too much, that they were prepared too well, that the other students aren’t where they are, miss class, complain, don’t want what the institution has to offer, that they aren’t the thinkers or the learners my students are. They come back to me years later and tell me they miss the rich landscape of their two-year college composition class.

In the end, however, I leave each class session feeling like they’ve given me at least as much as I’ve given them. Bits of their lives. Snapshots of their emotions. Confessions of their vital, life-shaping truths. Evidence of their growth, the changes they undergo. So many gifts to be unwrapped, to be carried with me, such as the student with all the tattoos and piercings who met his wife in my class and went on to get his Master’s degree in Human Development and return to the college to lecture on bipolar disorder and its role in his poems. And the students who love writing so much after College Composition that they go on to creative writing classes, and then to degree programs in creative writing, to MFA programs, and return to me with their published books held in their hands. Even the ones who thought they couldn’t write at first.

What’s the secret? Where’s the joy? It’s in the students, what they give, what they take, how they wake, how they grow, and what they are when they return years later, having been converted in the very church of expression. I am a missionary. I bring them to the water to drink. I graft a branch and watch it bear fruit. There is no greater reward than this.
References


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