Foibles, Follies and Fantastic Occurrences: First-Time Teaching and the Composition Classroom

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FOIBLES, FOLLIES AND FANTASTIC OCCURRENCES: FIRST-TIME TEACHING AND THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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By
Susan K. Swanson

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FOIBLES, FOLLIES AND FANTASTIC OCCURRENCES: FIRST-TIME TEACHING
AND THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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Foibles, Follies and Fantastic Occurrences: First-time Teaching and the Composition Classroom

explores incidents that expectedly—and often, unexpectedly—occur in any instructor’s classroom, but especially focuses on the first-time instructor. Following the author’s journey from graduate student to graduate assistant to teaching assistant, the thesis describes the steps along the way to teaching that many who have written about the subject leave out—how to negotiate the days before classes begin, what to do to appear older than the students themselves, how to create an interesting and creative syllabus. Once classes begin, instances involving student competition, peer review, responding to student essays and handling student excuses arise and are confronted and reflected upon by the author.

In order to negotiate these instances, specific events that occurred in the author’s classroom are used as examples. Added to these examples are insights from other instructors, pedagogical practices, scholarship from wise and experienced writers and teachers and suggestions on ways to handle such occurrences in the future. The author calls specifically for more conversation on the subjects that bear little scrutiny in the academic world—those events that embarrass, fail, intimidate and confuse. With more conversation on classroom problems of any kind, teachers might learn from one another’s experiences and find new solutions. Moreover, new instructors will feel more comfortable with expressing concerns and realize that they are not alone in their fears about teaching. While each classroom is different and has its own
set of circumstances, the insights offered by the author draw on myriad other teachers’ experiences and proposals and are adaptable to many types of classrooms.
Introduction

Teaching for the first time is scary—and teaching a composition class while still in graduate school strikes fear in the heart that even wise advice and instructional books cannot alleviate. The list of fears an instructor might have before teaching his/her first writing class is based upon the myriad books on teaching writing that one might read in order to prepare him or herself—at least somewhat—for the first day. Many of the writers—Murray, Elbow, and Bartholomae among them—focus on what one might teach, what pedagogy one might choose, and how one will go about structuring the class. After reading some of these, I began to believe that everyone knew what they were doing but me. Yet when I spoke to my colleagues about teaching, they had stories to share about how sometimes they still got nervous before the first day, even if they had been teaching for years. Other graduate students confided that they worried about such things as looking too much like a student themselves and whether they should keep the class the whole time on the first day. I was relieved by these confessions, but also puzzled as to why I did not find much literature on the subject. It seemed to be something that other instructors of writing thought about, yet, until I felt brave enough to admit my inadequacies, it seemed a trivial and inconsequential subject that I should not even bother asking others about.

Beginning to teach as a first-year instructor is one of the most intimidating scenarios I have ever encountered. Eighteen-year-old freshmen with bed head, dressed in red university-logoed hoodies or T-shirts three sizes too big and frayed, fashionably holey jeans may not seem like formidable people to meet at eight o’clock in the morning on the first day of the semester... but believe me, I have never met anyone with more ability to
make me feel unprepared, unknowledgeable and—Heaven forbid—uncool.

However, I had to remind myself constantly that I was *not* completely unprepared or unknowledgeable. When I became a graduate assistant in the English department at Western Kentucky University, I began taking classes to help guide me through the intricacies of teaching and I started working as a tutor in the Writing Center. Both of these experiences afforded me the materials to begin my journey teaching writing: literature, scholarship, and experience with helping students write effective essays. I learned a great deal, but I was also relieved that I would not have to begin teaching for another year, so I would have much more time to prepare myself.

Soon after my first semester as a graduate assistant I was informed that I would be teaching the fall and spring semesters of the upcoming year—one semester *before* I thought I would start. I had taken all the requisite classes and had the correct amount of graduate hours to begin, so all I had left to do was begin taking the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching (FaCET) modules online that summer to help prepare me for my own class. These modules included ideas and exercises on how to build goals for the class, construct a syllabus, implement an activity you have to create and grade, and design a rubric. And while my classes, tutoring, and FaCET aided me in my teaching, they did nothing to ease my fears—I still worried that I had so much yet to learn. I was uncertain about how to get my class to interact, what activities would be engaging, even what to wear. But as Murray, Elbow and Emig write, my experience as a writer was all I needed to qualify me as a writing teacher. I wanted to teach—it was the reason I came to graduate school in the first place—but did it have to occur *so soon*?
Despite my experience with FaCET, I still had a difficult time trying to figure out what to plan for the class and what to put in my syllabus. I wondered how I should fix my hair (which is long and curls in crazy ringlets about my face), what clothes I should wear to appear older and more adult (as I am, in tennis shoes, a statuesque 5’1”), and whether or not I should smile on the first day of class (because I did not want to appear too friendly or easy-going—two things which, I cannot argue, I wholeheartedly am).

I knew some activities and readings I wanted to incorporate in the class, but decided against using several of them because I was under the impression that I should follow a structure of some sort—they were freshmen, so they needed to learn how to write descriptive narratives and persuasive, analytical, and research essays. Or at least that is what I thought—I wasn’t exactly sure what went on in various freshman composition classes, but I didn’t want to be looked down upon by my professors—er, colleagues—so I looked up available online syllabi and followed the arrangement other professors laid out for their classes. I wanted the class to be fun for the students—or I at least hoped to avoid the boredom that is so often associated with writing and reading about writing.

Once I actually began teaching, it became obvious that finding a way to make each activity and exercise fun for the students depended upon how well I knew what they thought was fun. Once I got over my fear of the students seated before me in neat little rows, I began to look at them as people, as individuals that I could learn from. This, in turn, allowed me to be more comfortable with them, and them with me, and we developed a student/teacher relationship. I asked them questions, I gave them short
surveys, and we discussed what they liked, disliked, and wanted to know and learn about writing.

This was hardly the end of my trials and tribulations with teaching for the first time. Once I developed a tentative rapport with the students, I realized that in order for them to actually discuss things in class with one another, rather than sitting in the circle of desks and staring at their fingernails, notebooks, the floor, or anywhere but someone else’s eyes and responding with zeal about something they liked or hated in the assigned essay, they would have to feel comfortable with *one another*. There had to be a way that I could help them establish student/student relationships past the awkward, shy, and often competitive associations found in college classrooms.

Although I felt apprehensive about beginning to teach college writing to freshmen, I felt fairly secure in the knowledge that I would not have to deal with the one thing I had been running from on all other levels of teaching: discipline problems. I did not want to teach middle school-age children because of my own negative associations with middle school—the awkward, socially confusing, frustrating memories of preteen-dom—and because of the tales my father, as a middle school teacher and counselor, told me about yelling over rowdy students and being the subject of pranks and ridicule. High school, while more appealing, also held memories of smart-alec boys and gossipy girls trying to get out of class to loiter in the bathroom or visit the library and socialize. The only time I remembered discipline as a non-issue was in college—just one more reason to add to a growing list of why I would teach college-aged students.

However, I was wrong. Discipline problems were just another unexpected hiccup in my fledgling teaching career. The situation that occurred in my classroom, however, is
not a single incident on a particular campus. It is representative of any classroom, with any instructor, on any campus. That is the thing that perhaps frustrated me most about it—I recognized that this could not be an issue solely relegated to me and my classroom, but found it difficult to one, find much literature on the subject of discipline problems in college classrooms and two, share my story with anyone else because I felt if no one else was talking about it, perhaps there was a reason for that. Perhaps I was handling things badly, or this was something one learned through trial and error. But once I let my paranoia pass and actually spoke to other individuals, I realized that my initial impression was correct—my classroom problem had occurred in many other classes—not only in my department, but presumably across the world. So rather than lament the fact that I could not find the literature I was looking for on this subject, I began the arduous process of recounting my own experiences to help other instructors with problems they did not know how to solve. While these stories are, by no means, success stories where everyone wins in the end, I hope that they at least will give other instructors insight on what they can do if they have any kind of discipline or competitive problem in their classrooms. Or, if nothing else, they will show others that they are absolutely not alone.

The scenarios I came upon in my first semester of teaching college writing were new to me and were often confusing and difficult. Luckily, I had other first-time teaching graduate assistants to go to with my problems—they might not have had answers for me (although occasionally there were some)—but sharing my problems with others in the same tumult of teaching, taking classes and attempting to manage time helped me. These teacher/teacher relationships gave me insight, comfort, and sometimes, answers.
I often wish that I had been given a guide of sorts to help me understand the experience of teaching for the first time, which I felt, no matter how much I learned from seasoned professors the semester before beginning to teach, I had been haphazardly thrown into. That is why I decided to record some of the events that expectedly, and often unexpectedly, came up when I began teaching—the foibles, follies, and fantastic occurrences of the composition classroom.

While there may be other literature out there pertaining to this subject, I hope to shed an honest, forthright light on what really goes on in the minds of beginning teachers in front of the classroom, and what processes we go through to ensure that the students in our classes are getting what they came for—and hopefully, some things they did not expect, like an enjoyable classroom environment. I want to provide a resource for other first-timers to turn to and learn that they are not alone, that there may actually be answers to their questions, and if not answers, at least new insights or suggestions.
Things One Worries About Before Teaching Their First Writing Class:

1. Am I comfortable enough with the material I am presenting to teach it to others?
2. Do I know enough pedagogy to impart a particular or preferred teaching style to my students?
3. Did I relay my goals for the class in an interesting and informative manner in the syllabus?
4. Will I be able to easily facilitate learning in this classroom environment?

Things I Worried About Before Teaching My First Writing Class:

1. Am I comfortable enough with the material I am presenting to teach it to others?
2. Do I know any pedagogy? What is pedagogy again?
3. Did I put goals on the syllabus? Where is the syllabus—I know it’s here somewhere . . .
4. Where is the copy machine to make copies of my syllabus?
5. Will I appear to be the instructor in this classroom, and therefore be able to facilitate the students’ learning? Or will I blend in with the students and have to stand on top of my desk and yell to be noticed?
6. How should I wear my hair?
7. Should I wear heels?
8. Is a suit too much? Should I wear somber colors, like black or brown, as they tell you to do in a serious job interview?
9. Should I smile?
10. Should I quit now and hide under the covers until all this anxiety subsides and I can go back to my safe, normal life as a writing tutor?
Chapter One—Props, Preparation, and Perceptions: Establishing Authority in the Classroom

Black patent heels. Crimson alligator stilettos. Chunky suede platforms. Snowy white wedges. On my closet door hang myriad shoes in varying colors, styles, and fashions. Most of them have heels. While this is not abnormal by today’s standards—most women are aware of the fashionable nature of high heels—it leads me to reflect on why I began wearing them in the first place. It was not because of trying to “fit in” with the latest fashions, nor was it just because I liked them—although I do. It was because my whole life I have been petite. Barefoot, I stand about five feet tall. I like to tell people I am 5’1”, but that’s with shoes with no heel. My height has always been a source of conversation for me, which continues to surprise and, occasionally, irritate me. When meeting new people, the most outgoing (often tactless) ones comment on it: “Well, you’re awfully small, aren’t you?” Or, “You’re a little bitty thing!” And the always polite, “You’re so short!” Notice that each of these statements sounds as if it should be directed to a child. I have gotten each of them while in my twenties.

This is not to say that I dislike my height—I’m comfortable with it; I’ve been through all the growing pains about my features and have come to like the fact that I am a smaller woman. I see no shame in it, and I rarely even notice it except in pictures with extremely tall friends. Other people usually have something to say about it—whether it is tactful or not—so it is, at the very least, a source of constant conversation for me. And I have met women much shorter in stature than I, so it is not as if I am the shortest person I know. However, I never realized how much it can affect what others think about you until I entered graduate school. Add to my height the facts that I have a young-looking face (with freckles), long, naturally curly hair, and that I am a female, and from what I
gathered from my professors, I was going to have a tough road ahead of me as an instructor.

The first day—and the first week, for that matter—of teaching a writing class usually results in the culmination of all the things you’ve worried about, all the things you’ve prepared for, and all the things you are worried you aren’t prepared for. The relationships I wanted to develop with my students depended incredibly upon how they viewed me as a teacher, from the first visual impression to the end of the first week of class. Not only would my gender, physical appearance and presentation style be analyzed, but also the syllabus I handed out in that first class. That piece of paper would tell my students exactly what to expect from me and the class itself for the semester.

I never paid much attention to syllabi—they were just contracts that the instructors wrote to tell the students what they would be doing in class. But that syllabus is actually the first piece of writing the students will see that not only tells them what the class will entail, but what you will be like as a teacher—what you will tolerate, what you won’t, what you like and dislike, and especially how you write. This is a factor that few instructors—including me—take into consideration when deciding what material is relevant for the class, what essays they will read and what they will talk about. But in my ideal writing class, the students should be able to learn about me, my pedagogy, my history, my writing, through not only what I appear to be and what I present to the class, but also the writings I give to them, such as the syllabus.

After church with my parents one Sunday we walked into a local Applebee’s Restaurant for lunch. I was busy admiring my new outfit—a black skirt that came to my knees with a red and black suit jacket that I thought made me look very grown-up, much
older than my thirteen years—when the hostess, a perky brunette, bounded over to seat us at our table. She grabbed two glossy menus from the box on the hostess stand and turned, to my dismay, to me with a bright, plastic smile.

“And would you like a children’s menu, honey?” My ebullient heart sank to my toes.

I scowled darkly and mumbled “no,” looking down at my black patent ballet flats while my mother explained that I was several years over the age limit for their children’s menu; I just looked young.

“Oh! Well, you’ll appreciate that someday!” recovered the moronic hostess, her ponytail bobbing insipidly. I spent the rest of our time there deflated, slouched in my side of the maroon vinyl booth.

Why did I include this story? Because as I began thinking about my future teaching career, I realized that my height and appearance did not just affect how others saw me—but because of the way I have continually been viewed, it affected the things I thought about myself. Left to my own devices, I would never even notice that I am the smallest person in my group of friends, or that all of my boyfriends have been close to a foot taller than me. Nor do I think it would have been such an issue in teaching for the first time, if others had not called attention to those facts so often that it had become ingrained in my mind that there was somehow something wrong, or difficult, about my height and young face. People sometimes view such traits as those belonging to someone inexperienced, someone not “in charge,” or even someone not to be taken seriously. It has taken me years to figure out how to be taken seriously by those who know and do not know me. Therefore, while these opinions have not changed the fact that I want to teach,
they have, as Marian Lee states, “shaped the way I, and apparently my students, tend to perceive myself in this role.” When the other graduate assistants and I talked about what advice we were given before beginning to teach, across the board each experienced professor, male and female, told us to dress professionally, try to look older, wear heels if you are a petite female. These are good trinkets of advice from those with experience—but I couldn’t help but question the need for such crutches, even if they were helpful. It made me wonder what an instructor must do to earn the respect he/she wants, expects, and deserves in the classroom, and how one begins the class in order to foster those relationships with the students that frequently prove so vital for a successful writing classroom.

In order to begin answering these questions, I had to turn to the other relationships in my budding academic career: the relationships I had with my colleagues. A colleague, in this context, refers not only to the tenured professors in the English department with whom I had a friendly relationship, but also to my fellow graduate students and graduate assistants. Through conversations with these people, I received “tricks of the trade,” ideas on what not to wear, and thoughts about how much of my real personality (which can be somewhat goofy and laid-back) I should let shine—especially that first week. I valued my colleagues’ opinions for several reasons: one, several of them had had years of experience teaching; two, I was a beginning instructor and wanted to accomplish successfully what was expected of me by my department; and three, I did not want to look like I had no idea what to do or how to be successful as a writing instructor. The third reason held the most weight in my mind as I searched frantically for the “right” answers to my questions. Most of all, I did not want to appear foolish in front of my
colleagues—a fear I believe many instructors have and are reluctant to voice. As Lad Tobin states, “While our peers are not literally in our classrooms, they are almost always present in our thoughts, assumptions and anxieties and, I would argue, influence almost every decision we make.” These “anxieties” I possessed led me to obsess about the other faculty members and what choices they would make, were they again in my brand-new, never-been-worn shoes—er, *heels*. The teacher/teacher relationships I had established and had yet to establish with the other faculty members influenced the choices I eventually made about how to establish student/teacher relationships based upon mutual respect and a successful classroom with a young, petite, female, first-time teacher leading it. Like Carrie Heimer comments about teaching for the first time, I saw that I, too, was “in a position of authority rather suddenly, though perhaps I’ve never identified myself as the teaching ‘type,’ and I waver[ed] between the smugness of mastery in my subject, and the ego-crushing blow of a flip student asking without thinking, ‘How old *are* you? Have you done this before?’” Yet where Heimer wavers on at least one positive aspect of her teaching, I had less confidence in my “mastery” of my subject. While I knew I liked to write and I knew how to write—well, ostensibly—I was not sure I had mastered writing. Certainly not the teaching of it.

While discussing Shirley Wilson Logan’s “‘When and Where I Enter’: Race, Gender, and Composition Studies” in my first graduate class, Writing and Rhetoric, someone broached the subject of gender in the classroom.

“It seems that white, middle-aged males have the easiest time—at least in the beginning, with the initial impression—as teachers. They can come in dressed however
they want and they will be respected,” commented Nicole, a first-year graduate student like myself.

“I agree with that—it seems those who are races other than white, who are female, and who are young have a more difficult time in those first few days and weeks of classes because they have to prove themselves somehow,” replied Theresa as she pulled her long brown hair out of its low ponytail and pulled it back again.

“Yeah, I think you’re right—or at least in my experience. I never had anyone question my authority the first week of class. No one seemed unable to grasp the concept that I was their instructor for freshman composition. Of course, I’ve only taught these two sections this semester, so I guess I could be wrong,” Jeff, a new graduate teaching assistant, said with a half-smile.

“So, what about us?” I asked, gesturing towards Nicole, Theresa, and myself—all young, female, and comparatively petite. “Is there anything we need to or could do in order to establish our authority over our classrooms?”

Dr. L, our professor, cleared his throat and put his pen down on top of his yellow legal pad, on which he had been scribbling furiously just moments before. “Well, there is the topic of dress. Yes, I think all of you could wear high heels and professional clothing in order to set yourselves apart from the students,” he said with a smile.

I had noticed that Dr. L wore a tie to every class. Did it change the way I thought about him as a professor? No—but he was also a white male. He had a beard. It was pretty obvious to me he had authority. But perhaps he wore a tie not only to set himself apart, but because he just felt comfortable working in “work” clothes. Would I feel comfortable dressing up in professional clothes for every class? Yes, I loved to dress up.
So it was not as if I would be doing anything outlandish by doing so for my class. It seemed like a good idea to “set myself apart” from the other students—I was a student, so I knew I looked like one. The ideas Dr. L and other professors I felt comfortable talking to about such a trivial thing as clothing agreed—wear professional clothes, it will help establish your authority. I did not question—it seemed like something that might work for me, so I did it.

I am not alone in the fact that I am a young, petite female teacher. Nor, thankfully, am I alone in sharing it with others. In her days as a graduate teaching assistant, Juli Hong called her mother the night before classes began and was instructed to “wear lots of makeup” and heels—“the higher, the better.” What is fascinating about this is why Hong’s mother prescribed such tactics: because it was “all about respect.” Does the respect we deserve—or, at least, deserve to gain of our own merit rather than our appearance—always hinge on such seemingly unimportant matters as looks? It seems college writing instructors vacillate between believing whole-heartedly that their outfit will change the world!—or perhaps just their students’ mind-sets—and thinking that who they are and what they teach is what matters—not what they wear. In a response to Hong’s experiences on teaching, Amanda Fleming explains her own indecision at what “face” to present to her students: “Week 1: I wear a black three-piece suit to assert authority [. . .] Week 2: Because the rough drafts show serious signs of severe thesaurus usage, I let down my hair [and] wear khaki slacks.” Fleming describes how she wavers between types of clothing—and therefore, “types” of teaching styles (authoritarian, friend, etc.). She also decides she gets “more volunteers when [she] wear[s] [her] reading glasses.” While I cannot comment personally on the use of glasses
since (darn the timing) I had Lasik surgery the summer before graduate school, I can understand Fleming’s equation of her glasses with more positive student practices. She feels as if the students are responding to her “intellectual” side when she wears her glasses and therefore they are more prone to being involved. The reliance on outside “props”—styles of clothing, high heels, glasses, hairstyles, even beards for men—to be a successful and respected writing instructor may sound, to some, like—well, hooey. But it is something that almost all instructors do at some point, whether they realize it or not. The point here is that I—and many others—have to consider that these “props” might make or break our first week.

However, there are writing instructors who disagree with me. Brock Dethier argues that he seeks to “eliminate artificial barriers” between him and his students. He tries to “avoid [. . .] artificial means of building respect: the serious suits and serious shoes, the insistence on ‘Mister’ and ‘Mizz’ and ‘Professor.’” Dethier believes dressing casually is something that might not impress those tenured colleagues who only take those in “similar professional uniforms” seriously, but he does not think it is an effective means by which to convince students of one’s credibility. Dethier does admit that his “age, race, and gender complicate this issue, and as a balding white male [he] ha[s] it easy” but he feels that he would rather make an impression on students because of what he knows rather than what he wears.

To Dethier I would say: “Me, too! I want the students to pay attention to what I say rather than what I look like!” But since I am not a balding white male, or an experienced professor, or even a tall female that looks my age, I do not necessarily believe that I have that freedom—at least not with my initial impression with the
students. I want to—and hope to with age and experience—but I still believe that I do not. And, as Michelle Payne adds, “When a female teacher walks into a first-year writing class, she inevitably evokes responses from students a male teacher most likely does not.” The responses I gain upon entering the classroom are not the same Dethier might evoke—no matter what either of us wears.

Concerning the ability for teachers to be respected for our minds, bell hooks says that we begin questioning the way authority has been arranged in our classrooms and institutions when we discuss the “body and how we live in our bodies.” She says that the “person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body.” Therefore, because the typical male professor—of any race, I will even argue—already has the privilege of being looked upon as an authority figure simply because of his gender, he is able to deny his body, or the fact that his body has any impact whatsoever on students’ preconceived beliefs. Yet a woman—and added to that, a young, small woman—has not traditionally had the power in the academic institution (or, let’s be honest, most anywhere), to “deny” her body and therefore her gender and appearance, so she must use particular “props” in order to convince her students from the beginning that she has authority, rather than automatically eliciting it as a male might. A young, petite female does not have the privilege of “denying” her body because others constantly call attention to it—whether in conversation, impression, or level of respect. Students might believe a younger teacher would be more like their friend, and they could slack off now and then because they were “buddies,” or they might think a female would be more nurturing and caring, and therefore feel that they can get away with more just because she will “understand.” These are, of course, assumptions on my part, but they are also stereotypes.
based upon experience in my own classes and observations of classroom behavior in different situations. As Payne posits, “Students come in with so many assumptions about teachers, authority figures, and women as teachers and authority figures” and what changes or shakes those assumptions is how we interact with those students,\textsuperscript{12} perhaps even with what we wear.

Crossing the threshold to my first freshman composition class—as the teacher this time—made my stomach curl in on itself the way I wished to do, in the fetal position back in my cozy bed. My black pointed-toe high heels click-clacked across the linoleum as twenty-two pairs of eyes stared at me. After an eternity I made it behind the desk situated at the front of the classroom and set down my attendance book, stack of still-warm syllabi copies and pen. I looked up and tried to tell myself that they were just as, if not more, nervous as I was. The point was not to show them that I was nervous. “Show no fear, or they’ll eat you alive,” I said to myself, confusing college students with rabid dogs or reptiles or some such thing I’d seen on the National Geographic Channel. My black polyester pants felt constricting, and I wanted to shrug out of the deep blue button-down shirt I had chosen to pair them with. But I persevered.

“Hello. Welcome to Introduction to College Writing. I am Ms. Swanson. I’ll go ahead and take roll to make sure we’re all in the right place—let me know when I call your name if you go by something else, like a nickname or middle name,” I said in a fairly even, non-stuttering voice. Phew. I was proud—first two minutes out of the way. Fifty-three more to go.

As I called names and had brief conversations with my students—wow, my students—my knees started to relax and I decided I might actually be able to get through
this without throwing up. I made sure not to smile too often—another “prop” I learned from experienced teachers who said that number one, it made one look younger, and number two, if I didn’t smile often they might initially believe I was a difficult, serious instructor, causing them to work harder in expectation of that. It felt unnatural not to smile, as I smile constantly in “real” life, but figured these other teachers knew what they were talking about.

“Okay, I’m going to pass out the syllabus, and we’ll go over that for the first part of class,” I began as I counted out enough copies for each row. This was part of my first-day routine that many college professors might shake a finger at—from my FaCET training modules and some conversations I had with professors, I was under the impression that it was generally considered bad form, at least at Western, to go over the syllabus the first day. Maybe the second day, or maybe even not at all—the students can read, after all. Yet who is to say they will read it—believe me, most of them won’t. I was an undergraduate once. They need to know what is important to me as their instructor. By reading over the syllabus with them, I could add my own thoughts and asides about what was written in that didactic, contractual way syllabi had.

Syllabi commonly contain a great deal of statements that lay down rules and regulations: the student should do this, should not do that, will not receive a grade if, will be penalized if. And many times, this is for good reason. Obviously, instructors have had enough occurrences of these types of problems to incorporate them on what I like to call the Bible for the class. I included them on my own syllabus, as well as a rather lengthy statement about the non-use of cell phones and iPods in class—an emergent dilemma in classrooms across the world. These elements of a syllabus have become
standard over the years because they are necessary. A prenuptial agreement to our writing course that lays out all the ground rules for an immediate no-fuss divorce should we need one before semester’s end. Terry Caesar explains that the reason for so many “excruciating details” in our syllabi is to “defend against legal challenges by students—most obviously concerning grades but finally encompassing any conceivable matter having to do with evaluation.” In our society, it is usually a good idea to protect oneself against possible future “problems”—hence our preoccupation with insurance policies, signing on the dotted line, prenuptial agreements. Our syllabi are merely insurance policies against classroom problems or occurrences. But do they have to sound like insurance policies? Perhaps we should tell our students what we expect from them. We should include our guidelines. We should tell them what plagiarism is so that they do not unintentionally commit it. Maybe we should even talk about cell phone usage. But what we should not do is give up our own voice in order to do all this. As teachers, aren’t we already giving up our own idealizations and illusions of our classroom by right there on our syllabus anticipating all of the problems that could ever occur to occur? Why must we also give up our voices, the voices that will instruct, enliven, impassion our students to try things they never have in writing and challenge their own assumptions and beliefs about writing and the world in general? That is something we should not allow to happen. We need to show our students that any piece of writing can sound like “you” no matter what the genre and to show ourselves that we are still writers as well as instructors. This first piece of writing that the students will see from their teacher is one of the first bricks that help to build a relationship with them. Whether the syllabus is creative, using a narrative format, or humorous, making jokes or using sarcasm, or
personal, sharing personal anecdotes or favorite comics or excerpts from a beloved novel, at least the syllabus is then not only a piece of writing that the student should care about; it is something that the teacher obviously cared about.

Upon reading the syllabus with the students and asking if they had questions (funny that, on that first day, no one had questions, yet as the semester progresses, you get three hundred emails about issues whose answers are ALWAYS on the syllabus), I realize my language on the syllabus was stilted and often formal. Very unlike my actual writing. Given, I had copied (it isn’t plagiarizing when you ask permission, right?) from several instructors’ syllabi that I knew had been teaching awhile, but I had put it all—for the most part—in my own words. So why did the whole thing sound as if I were trying to be someone I was not—a fussy, prudish hard-ass? Perhaps I had unintentionally written it in that manner because I was trying to earn the students respect and assert my authority on paper. In a way, my syllabus had become just another “prop” to impress my students—if it is written in an authoritative manner, with many rules and regulations, then the students will see that I mean business and they won’t mess with me. But in all actuality, most of the syllabi I had seen—both in the classes I took and the ones I looked at online from our department—looked and sounded about the same. Yet I knew for a fact that most of the people who taught these classes those same syllabi were from were not fussy, prudish hard-asses, either. They were eloquent, interesting and often inspiring writers and instructors. So why did that never shine through on our syllabi?

A syllabus often has to contain particular elements for the institution and/or department one teaches in. Basic contact information, a set of goals for the class, how the class might fill general education requirements (assuming it does at all),
accommodations for disabilities, a statement on plagiarism and required texts are all parts of a basic syllabus. In fact, The Guide to General Education English Courses at WKU has an example of a commonly used English 100 syllabus in it that looks remarkably like my own. Many add to the university requirements a list of what the students will be graded on for the semester and a breakdown of what each of those items entails. On top of all of this, it has become customary to include requirements for how essays should be turned in: “Times New Roman Font, 10 or 12 pt., double-spaced with 1” margins all around.” This exact line appears in my syllabus. Why? Because I have witnessed students attempting to make essays longer by setting them with 14 pt. font, or using a font that takes up more room, or setting the margins to one and a half or even two inches. Putting these in the syllabus is an effort to dissuade the students from such practices early on. It is, essentially, an attempt to nip passive-aggressive discipline problems in the bud right there on the first day. Does it help? In some cases—perhaps. But there will always be those students who do it, anyway.

The syllabus might also contain a class schedule describing what you will be doing each day of the semester. I understand the urge to do this—many students like to know what will be going on in class in order to schedule study and writing time around schedules for other classes, and it is also helpful for instructors to plan ahead and know what they will be doing on particular days of the semester. However, I believe it is “jumping the gun,” so to speak, to imagine that the entire class will or should function as others in the past might have or as one believes they should. This, of course, is my own opinion based on observation of my own classes and the classes I have been a student in. The ideas I assert here are merely suggestions for a more personalized, student-centered
classroom, should one have the desire to take them. I believe each class you teach is different, and often some classes will grasp concepts and put them into action much more quickly than others. Some classes, in my experience, might do unbelievably well with writing narratives and connecting things they learn or read about to events in their own lives, but struggle with the idea that all writing can be persuasive and how to go about backing up an argument they make. Others might be the exact opposite of that. While a tentative class schedule is good to give the students, perhaps it should not span much longer than the first month of class, and the instructor should leave room for possible changes if the students are moving more or less quickly than anticipated. Since all students and classrooms are different, a writing class should allow for the growth that is natural to that class, that semester, that year, in that institution. An idea you thought might take a whole week for the class to understand may take one class, and then you are free to move on to things they can connect to it in order for them to eventually practice it on their own. Also, after a month you should know your students and their abilities enough to predict what will work best for their learning for the next month of class.

Most of the literature on syllabi creation is dedicated to what to include in your syllabus and what the syllabus should do: act as a contract, serve as an organizational tool, or provide an outline for the class— all examples discussed earlier when I explained what my own syllabus contained, how it acts a contract and outline for the class, and why we include such things. Author Anis Bawarshi discusses syllabi as a writing genre in his book, *Genre and the Invention of the Writer*. He suggests the words “we” and “you” so commonly used in syllabi “establish solidarity with students and
There’s that word again—authority. Apparently I am not the only one using the syllabus as a shield to hide behind.

After having taught freshman composition for one year, I still believe that a syllabus should give the “ground rules” for the classroom and tell the students what to expect. These expectations are something we, as teachers, can point to at the end of the semester and say, “Yes, it’s right here;” and the students cannot effectively plead ignorance. The “props” that are essential (yes—essential) to a young, first-time teacher are still effective means by which one might establish authority and respect in the classroom—and here is where I might surprise you—at least for the first few weeks. I have found that after establishing my expectations of the class in the beginning, the students respond by being attentive, fairly well-prepared (obviously it varies), and attending class regularly. They respect me as their instructor, and I proceed to get to know them. Once that authority is somewhat established, I see no harm in dressing a little casually once in awhile—wearing jeans, letting hair down, even wearing flats (gasp!). And it has not (so far) affected the way the students view me: they keep the respect that my “props” afforded, yet start to see me as a person, as well—one who wears jeans sometimes. Also, by this time they have begun to know me as an instructor who respects them and their thoughts, and I have begun to earn the authority that I faked (because of my self-perceptions and their pre-conceived ones) in the beginning. Our relationship becomes a little more personal—as each of us become people as well as just teacher and student. Perception is important—and first impressions do matter. But once a relationship is established, I think the boundaries can be dropped a fraction to include a bit of personal preference. The only thing that changed in most of my classes when I
started occasionally dressing more casually was that students became surprised to see me appear at the door of the classroom with no forewarning *clack, clack* of heels.
Chapter 2—Disrespect, Discipline and Disillusionment

Julie*, a quiet non-traditional—if one can really call a twenty-seven-year-old non-traditional—student of mine came to me before a day of classroom debates with an uncharacteristic gleam in her brown eyes.

“We are allowed to use sources in our debates, right?” she asked.

“Certainly,” I replied. “Use anything that will help you to back up your argument.”

“Great—we found this website that backs up everything we have to say. They won’t be able to dispute us!” she exclaimed. I was puzzled yet intrigued; Julie came to me at the beginning of the semester worried about her participation grade because she did not think she could be active in class discussion because the other (younger) students annoyed her: “I just can’t stand hearing ‘like’ every other word,” she had explained.

When she bounded up to my desk before the debate, flushed with anticipation to begin, I was impressed. Obviously she had somehow gotten past her self-professed “annoyances” with the other students.

When it was Julie’s team’s turn to begin their opening statement, Julie whipped open her laptop and stood in front of the group for the opposing side. She tucked her long brown hair self-consciously behind her ear and began reading: “Seatbelts should not be required to be worn by the state because . . .” Julie’s voice was light, almost whisper-thin, and as she read I found I had a hard time keeping up with the points she made because she never paused for a breath or to give her audience time to contemplate. I thought Julie would stop reading the website verbatim at some point and go on to make

*All students’ names have been changed to protect their privacy.
her group’s case in her own words, but she didn’t. She continued to drone on and on, and
the longer she spoke the more nervous I became—I could barely keep up with the
sentences she was reading; how would the other students begin to understand the points
she was making? But I had not told the students that they couldn’t read—I just assumed
they wouldn’t—so how was I going to stop this? As I thought this, I noticed those
students in the opposing group and the audience getting twitchy: an eye roll here, a seat-
shifter there. As I was mentally debating what to do, I heard audible sighs from the
audience—or, rather, one audience member in particular. Allison, a talkative and
opinionated student, rolled her eyes and “harrumphed” loudly enough for the whole room
to hear. I looked at her and sternly arched an eyebrow, attempting to quiet her while not
interrupting Julie. She raised her strawberry blonde eyebrows in challenging response
and loudly whispered, “But she’s reading! She can’t do that!” Allison looked at her
sidekick, Krista, who muttered something under her breath that made Allison once again
exclaim, “Yeah; she’s reading!” Her breath hissed out between her clamped teeth as she
narrowed her blue eyes at the part on Julie’s brunette head, still bent to read the lines
from the computer, apparently oblivious.

In the midst of Allison’s whisperings, a few members of the opposing side of the
“seatbelt” debate were also enjoying outward displays of obnoxiousness at the classes’—
and Julie’s—expense. Mark leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as if he were
falling asleep, then leaned forward to make a “Can you believe this?” face. Lacey and
Max, two other members of the group, giggled quietly like third-graders and Max
covered his entire face with both of his hands. I looked at them with my meanest face
(not difficult to muster at this point) and motioned for them to cool it. They looked
anywhere but at me but at least stopped their act.

When reflecting upon this situation, I often come back to essentially the same idea Allison had minus the incredulity. Why did Julie read? The other students—all eighteen or nineteen-year-olds—knew there was something wrong with reading and not inserting one's own ideas and thoughts when one is presenting an argument. So why didn't Julie—a twenty-seven-year-old with decidedly more life experience—know? I could speculate that it was Julie’s life experiences that had made her unsure of herself, rather than confident. That she felt more secure presenting someone else’s ideas than her own because of her insecurity. Or perhaps it was more. Gender studies over the years have posited numerous ideas about the female and male modes of rhetoric and the decided differences between the two. Perhaps Julie was unknowingly naturally adhering to the female mode of rhetoric. In a study she conducted on the subject, Sarah D’Eloia noted that some women

begin with the sense that their convictions are well founded in the facts and their experience and with the feeling that their conclusions are likely to be written off, unless they can lead the audience through the line of reasoning and the felt nature of the experiences upon which they have based their conclusion.16

So, assuming that Julie had the life experience—if not the academic instruction—to know how to begin an argument and follow it through, it would be logical to say that her beginning with the facts that should lead to the overall conclusion is the female method of “backing up” one’s argument. This approach, which D’Eloia calls “indirection,” directs the listener or reader through a “set of experiences and/or a line of reasoning, holding off the conclusion until they have made it almost impossible to reject the validity—emotional or logical—of what they say.”17 Since I eventually cut Julie off from
her conclusion, it is *possible* that she intended, once she had presented every fact she could so that the other team could not dispute her, to give her own analysis and conclusion of the argument at the end of her reading. It is also possible—and, in my experience with Julie, more probable—that while she may have begun in this female mode of rhetoric fully without intention, she more than likely did not propose to end with her own conclusions, but the website’s. Julie needed more direction in argumentation—she had the idea about using sources to back up one’s argument correct, but she missed the part about using your own thoughts as well. Julie was on her way to understanding but had not yet grasped the whole concept of persuasion. Using the classical rhetorical terms, there were no appeals to pathos in her argument and she lost all ethos for her audience, and her only appeals to logos came directly from the website she glued her eyes to for the entire argument.

Allison, however, could not fathom why Julie was reading the website rather than making her point and arguing about it—as most of us have been taught and have witnessed on *Law and Order* and *Boston Legal*. So she might have been more comfortable, or at least familiar, with the male mode of rhetoric. D’Eloia says that many schools and colleges “teach the male mode of argumentation,” so “it is not surprising to find many women who write and speak in the male mode.” While the issue of *disrespecting* one another—and their modes of rhetoric—is what I focus on here, it is important to note that the differences in gender presentation is an issue that should be looked into more fully in our classrooms. Just because a student does not introduce their argument the way we are used to or favor does not mean that it is not valid—or at least worthy of contemplation. These are some of the unexpected happenings that creep up—
from first-time teaching through retirement—that we, as teachers, must consider rather than disregard.

As I got to know my spring semester 11:30 college writing class, I began to notice that they were more outgoing than other students I had had in the past semester, or in my current 9:10 class. They had no problems talking to one another even from the beginning, which I found refreshing. For once I would not have to cajole them to speak during class discussions!

I began the class with my expectations for the semester, from them and for the class. I sat casually on the edge of my desk, which had become my customary classroom position, and talked to the students about discussion, group work and learning from one another’s ideas. I incorporated the ideas of college professor and composition guru Donald Murray into my spiel, saying that I wanted us to form a writing community and to feel comfortable enough around one another to share our ideas, writing, and problems we might be having with drafts. As opposed to a more traditional classroom style they might have been used to in high school, I wanted them to respond to this “new” idea of a community classroom, where the instructors are simply members of the community and the students do much of the teaching themselves, and for one another. I was focused on the idea of not leading, but “bringing students to the center of [the] classroom” which, in turn, means that I had to “take […] them more seriously, grant them more respect and intelligence than ha[d] been acknowledged before.”

I hoped that this would make for a laid-back, inviting atmosphere that would encourage the students to share their writing. I wanted to empower them to step up and accept the challenges of critiquing one another’s work and having their own scrutinized
like real writers—not just a bunch of students thrown into the same room at the same
time in order to fulfill a Gen. Ed. requirement. The relationships the students would be
making with one another and me through their writing and reading of writing would aid
this community in becoming successful, and the community atmosphere would help to
foster the relationships.

In romanticizing my students and the idea that it would be possible to co-exist in
this community of writers, I was, as Michelle Payne noted, “opening myself up as a
teacher for criticism and doubt, inviting them into a relationship with me that was more
co-equal than many of them had experienced with teachers before, and also inviting them
into my own personal and professional struggle with who I [was] as a writing teacher.”20
I knew that the worries I had about my teaching strategies and their effectiveness would,
at some point, be projected onto the students, and that I would probably think that they
intentionally caused “problems” in order to test me—although, logically, I also knew that
they were probably simply wrapped up in their own little worlds and did not think about
me much at all. However, I also wondered if I might be a bit idealistic to believe that we
could actually achieve a sense of community in the classroom. Lad Tobin says that he
understands the need to reject power as leader in the classroom; however,

democratic, egalitarian rhetoric of that [classroom community] model
[. . .] is simply not plausible or, for that matter, desirable. We [teachers]
have power in this situation, and though we may not like to admit it, part
of the thrill of teaching and of being taught has to do with the way we use
that power. We may decide to allocate some of it, share it with our
colleagues and our students, but the fact remains that it was ours in the
first place. 21

So, while the idea of a classroom community is well-intentioned, and at times well-
received, it takes a certain kind of teaching strategy to implement it. Rather than simply
tell the students, “I expect you to respect one another and me, and I want you to get to know one another and feel comfortable enough to share your writing,” and let that be that, one must also offer activities and guidance to facilitate the community. Suggestions for help in this area include putting them in small groups more often, mixing it up so they can get to know different people than those seated around them, and remembering what they write and talk about in class and conferences so that when those topics come up in class discussions or writing workshops, you can ask them to share. But sometimes—at least in my own experience—even those approaches do not work. So what is going wrong in my relationship with the students and their relationships with one another—and how might I begin fixing it?

The students seemed enthusiastic about our “community”—or enough of them nodded and smiled that I thought they might at least become enthusiastic—and participated in “getting-to-know-you” activities and group work with zeal. I acknowledged that these students may not have had much independence in classes where they might speak freely, write about their own opinions, or be a part of a class that interacted with their teacher as if she were like them (horrors!). They felt their way around for the first few weeks—I did not expect them to get the hang of this class structure immediately, and so when they occasionally spoke out of turn or over someone else I let it slide. At least they were spirited, right?

However, as the class progressed I also noticed that several of these students had no problems talking anytime—when I was talking, when other students were talking or asking questions, during a writing activity. I began to get annoyed, but I was also able to quiet them by staring their way—until they noticed that they were being watched—and
raising my eyebrows at them pointedly. Usually they would simply stop talking or smile sheepishly and look down at their desk.

I use “they” in an all-encompassing sense here, because it was not only one student, nor was it one group of students who distracted class in this manner. It was, at different times, several different students in various groups in the classroom. I wanted to chalk it up to one “bad” student or group; one indifferent mind-set that infected others and let it distract the classroom. But that really was not the case—it was the group in the back right corner and a couple of students in the middle, and a few more over to the left. I began to wonder if it was my teaching style that affected them in such a way that they felt it was okay to talk on top of one another—maybe they thought, since I was younger and seemed “cool” that they could act as they wanted to, with very little respect for me or each other. Maybe my teaching “props” from the first few weeks did nothing to affect these students’ impressions of me. Perhaps the fact that I was a petite female reflected to them that I was unable to control the classroom, because obviously I wasn’t doing much about the talking problems yet. Maybe they knew I had only one semester’s worth of experience, had somehow sniffed the fact out like blood hounds and were now just goading me, circling me like the prey they intended to feed upon later in the year, when they had tired of playing with me. While these worries seemed a bit ridiculous and melodramatic when I attempted to articulate them to other writing instructors and graduate students, they hovered in the back of my mind nonetheless. I did not know what I was doing wrong to make and allow my students to act this way. I didn’t know if others had ever gone through this, and, like a harried Payne commented, “I rarely read about [. . .] teachers like me who feel riddled with self-doubt.” I was unsure of what to do with
my situation, but decided, for the time being, to wait things out.

A couple months into the class I started noticing the behavioral problem more often than once or twice a week. It became a habit for a particular group of students in the back right corner to groan loudly every time I asked the class to get in the discussion circle—which unnerved me to no end. Another duo in the back of the class, a male and a female, would whisper back and forth while I did a mini-lecture or talked about what writing exercises I had planned for the day or week. Every time this happened I would end class frustrated and annoyed, complaining to fellow graduate students about my students’ lack of engagement in the class and lack of respect to me or one another. I can’t even remember how many times I said petulantly, “I don’t want my 11:30 class anymore—will you teach them?” to a motley crew of people ranging from other graduate assistants to an accountant friend to my own mother. In my first semester of teaching I was spoiled by well-mannered, if at times quiet, students. I felt like less of a competent teacher for being unable to wrangle this new class into at least some semblance of a “community.” And I felt resentment towards my other, “good” students for not stepping up and helping to control the class themselves. I wanted my students to attain “the democratic virtues of honesty, tolerance, empathy, generosity, teamwork, and social responsibility.”23 I wanted them to police themselves, take on “social responsibility” like ideal college students should. Every time Jan, a bright, opinionated student in the class would roll her eyes at another student talking when they should not, I tried to say, “Do something! Show them you don’t like their actions! They’re your friends; they’ll listen to you!” with only my eyes. My imploring mental telepathy did not work.

Of course, I continued to question myself—maybe it was my problem, and not
theirs. Perhaps the activities and exercises I planned were not working. They were bored. They were not challenged. They were too challenged. I tried everything I could think of to guide the talking into something productive—small group work, class discussions about pop culture that related to our latest essay assignment, mini-lectures that involved the class with questions and exercises. The disrespectful talking remained.

In speaking with some colleagues on the matter, several told me, “Sometimes it’s just the group dynamic,” or “Some semesters are just worse than others.” I wasn’t ready to resign myself to an entire semester of this yet; however, I was not sure about actually talking to the students about the problem.

It seems I was incorrect in assuming that classroom behavior would be a non-issue in college. Some instructors, like me, are beleaguered by a small group of students who affect the overall learning environment of their classrooms. This small group of students had wreaked havoc in my own classroom, and now I was having a problem deciding how to deal with it.

My main concern was that I did not want to treat the students like they were in high school—yet, when they acted like immature young adults, how else could I treat them? I also worried that the “good” students were beginning to lose respect for me as I lost control of my classroom. I wondered if I should have had a contract of sorts for the students at the beginning of the semester like the authors of “Fostering Classroom Civility” suggest: “articulate[ing] explicitly to students what the expectations are for civility in the classroom, laying out the general rights and responsibilities of both students and instructor.”24 But was my beginning statement of classroom rules and expectations not enough? Was my authoritarian syllabus not doing its job? Did they really need to
see it in black and white and sign a contract that, with its very existence, undermined the
maturity I expected from the students in the first place?

While I did see the validity of such a document—if the authors who drafted it had
not had or heard of problems like my own, they would have had no reason to write and
implement it—I still did not want to introduce a banal "philosophy statement" into my
classroom at such a late stage. Perhaps if it had been executed in the beginning of the
class, it would have more validity with my current situation. But the problem was, my
students were not embracing our classroom community mentality—the one that they had
so enthusiastically agreed to (at least verbally) during the first class—and consequently,
were running all over me as I attempted to be a part of that community instead of their
"leader."

I still had not decided what to do—if anything—about the talking problem in my
class when we had "debate day." We were studying persuasive writing and what it takes
to back up and address the opposing side of an argument, and I told the class that we
could pick issues in class, get in groups, and debate them. They were excited to be doing
an activity sans writing and quickly brainstormed an enormous number of topics that I
listed on the board for the groups to choose from. Once the groups had chosen two
topics, we flipped a coin to decide which groups would go first and which side would
present their argument first. The first round of debates went well; each side presented
their argument without interruption from the opposing side or the "audience" (the rest of
the class) and then addressed the issues the opposing side brought up. Even in the end of
the round, when I let them "have it out," so to speak, they remained respectful of one
another's opinions and at least attempted not to speak over one another. The audience
voted on the “winning” side (the side with the strongest argument) and we moved on to the second round of debates. That was when Julie stepped up and delivered her soliloquy for the audience.

Julie’s words tumbled over one another as she barely paused between sentences. Inside, I was panicking about when and how to stop her, and wondering whether Julie had heard any of the rumblings from the other group and the audience. Acutely annoyed but trying not to lose my cool in front of the entire class and make a big deal out of something that could easily be extinguished, I waited for a place where Julie took a breath and quickly asked if she would mind letting the other side present their argument, as we were running out of time. She seemed a little deflated, but not terribly affected by the whisperings of Allison and her corner of cohorts or the displays from the opposing side. Julie’s group members, however, had noticed: and they looked as steamed as I felt.

I let the other side go and the rest of the debate went on fairly well until the end, when they got a little rowdy disagreeing with one another’s sides and talked loudly over one another. Sometimes when this happens it’s all in fun—the spiritedness of the debate just overwhelms the students and they get into what they are defending. However, I knew that after the situation we had just experienced during Julie’s reading I could not allow the debate to continue this way—who knew how the students would react to one another’s opinions after such overt displays of disrespect had occurred?

I called an end to the debate, which of course took a minute because the students were debating loudly enough that they were trying to ignore me. At that point, I was so exhausted from trying to hold it all together during the debate that I didn’t say anything to the class about their rudeness. A few students who talk to me on a regular basis about
class and life in general stayed behind to complain about Allison's behavior, and I assured them that I would be saying something to the entire class about respecting one another at the next class meeting—then immediately felt like I was doing something wrong by telling them how I felt. It seemed as if I were crossing a line in the class competition and stepping over to "their" side.

I find it interesting, too, that I could feel the pull of rivalry in the classroom that day. Although the debate normally creates a rise in competitive natures in the classroom, this was the first time in all my classes that it had resulted in rude, awkward, and bordering on mean behavior from the students. All of my other classes realized that the debate was all in fun and that it was designed to help them work with their group as a team and to promote more understanding of the nature and types of arguments that might be used in their upcoming essays. While at times they can get a bit feisty with one another when disagreeing, I had never had such overt discourtesy from my students.

The competitive aspect of the debate—and in class, for that matter—is something that is somehow overlooked when those of us who are proponents of the classroom "community" decide what the class will be based upon. How can one be competitive when they are supposed to also be working as a team? As Tobin writes, "while it may be politically correct to promote collaboration, consensus, and public discourse, the truth is that many peer relationships are shaped equally by competition, dissensus, and private interests." While I may favor the collaborative atmosphere of a classroom that works together on peer reviews and writing workshops and group projects, I am not an actual member of that classroom—at least not in the students' eyes (no matter how much I try to be). And how easy it is to forget how competitive students are with one another—sadly,
even when I am a student in graduate school at the same time as I teach the class. In order to better facilitate the kind of atmosphere I crave in my classroom, I need to remember what it was like to be a student—which should not be too difficult, considering I am a student. How many times had I heard students comparing grades on the essays I handed back at the end of class? How often had I noticed a flush of approval on the face of a student who made a particularly insightful remark during discussion, and then looked around to see other students with their eyes averted and fingers tapping nervously on their blue-jeaned thighs? This was competition in a less obvious manner than what was so palpable during the debates. I was only able to deal with it during the less noticeable times because, frankly, I ignored it. Once the competition between my students was acknowledged as an issue in the writing classroom, I immediately found it negative, because it created a "stressful, crippling, and counterproductive" atmosphere. However, weren't some of the most productive situations created from a sense of competition? When a sense of healthy competition between students is established—say, through group activities where the best essay is voted upon by other groups and that group gets extra credit points, or through publishing some student essays online—the students have a second goal to work towards, other than the ultimate goal of completing the task or getting a grade. They can use their competitiveness in a productive manner to improve their writing and interpersonal skills. This way competition and cooperation are not "mutually exclusive or even necessarily conflictual" as Tobin posits, but beneficial to the students' writing and relationships with one another.27

For the rest of the day after the debates, I remained frustrated and unsure of what to do about the class. I knew, at this point, that something had to be said. I berated
myself for not saying something sooner about the classes’ antics. I vented to coworkers, friends, and family members. And finally, I asked for advice. While I probably should have gone to an experienced professor about the problem and possible solutions, I instead consulted a fellow graduate assistant, Shea, whom I knew had had similar discipline problems in her classes the previous semester. At the time, she was jealous that none of the other assistants (including me) seemed to be having discipline problems. She felt incompetent and under-qualified as a writing instructor, and the fact that no one else seemed to have troubles made it even worse. She even decided by the end of her first semester teaching that she did not want to do it again, and went back to the Writing Center as a tutor, something she felt more comfortable with. So when I came to her with my trials and tribulations this semester, she smiled excitedly and said, “I can’t tell you how much better that makes me feel—I hate it that you are having these problems, but it does show me that maybe it wasn’t just me, or my teaching style, that made me have these problems last semester. Maybe it was the students, or the semester—maybe there are good and bad semesters.”

I reassured her that, no, it most certainly was not just her. I was about to tear my hair out at the root at this point, and I needed some advice.

“Do I say something to the entire class, or just individual students? There are so many of them at different times, it seems as if I should just address the class. And what do I say?” I asked her.

Shea explained that when she had had enough of one of her classes’ foolishness, she went to a trusted professor and asked his advice. After discussing the problem with him, she decided that she had to address the class. Shea came into class at the next
meeting and silently sat down at one of the seats in the discussion circle. She told the class that there was a problem, she explained what she thought the problem was, and she asked them how they felt it should be taken care of—what they could do and what she could do. The students did not want to respond, but finally, they came up with a few solutions for the problems.

I decided to approach my problem in the same manner, opening it up for discussion with the class to see first, if they agreed, and second, what we could do about it. At the end of the next class, after more debates—this time less openly hostile ones—and a writing exercise I hopped up to sit on my desk facing the classroom and took a deep breath. Looking out at the faces of my students, I said, “I wasn’t sure whether I was going to talk to you about this or not, but it seems we have a problem, and I can’t ignore it any longer. I had hopes that you would handle this yourselves, but that has not been the case, so it seems I have to step in. I only set one rule in the class—respect one another and one another’s opinions—and that rule has been overstepped several times, by different people at different times in the class. This is not about one single student or one occurrence, but about a series of these occurrences over the semester. This rudeness and disrespect has to stop, but I’d like your input on how you think we might go about that. What do you think we can do about this problem?”

The entire class looked around, at their desk, at me with indifferent eyes. I held my breath, waiting for someone, anyone, to say something.

“I can sit here all day,” I told them.

Finally, Billy looked up and said, “We should act like we know how to act.” Very simply put, but exactly true. I had already told them that I did not want to treat
them as high schoolers; they were supposed to be adults now, and I wanted to treat them as such. But if they continued to behave so immaturely, I did not know how I could do that. Billy summarized my speech in one succinct sentence. I agreed, asked if there were any other suggestions, and when there were not, dismissed the class with an inward sigh of relief.

I would love to say that this ended all of the talking and rudeness problems in my classroom after that, but it did not. There were still occasional outbursts of chatter here and there. However, I handled those outbursts with more finesse than I had before—the fact that I finally stood up and said, “Enough!” gave me the confidence to do it again. As they say, it only takes saying “no” once to continue to say it. My relationship with my students did not suffer, as I feared, from my talking to them about our problem—if anything, I think it made them respect me more as a teacher. And most importantly, this situation gave me the insight to realize that the competitiveness that students constantly have in their academic lives is not negative, that it can be used in the classroom to benefit them and their overall learning experience.

I think my hesitancy to share my problem in the classroom even with the students who were a part of it came from my own feelings of inadequacy at being a young, inexperienced teacher. But now I, like others before me, can recognize the power my story holds for myself and others. It can teach me and improve the way I teach. As writing instructors, I think we are constantly examining the way we teach and our habits to make ourselves better and produce a more functional, effective classroom. We reflect on problems or successes and decipher how we might mold our practices to deliver more of the good situations and less of the bad. My own practices, though young, must remain
in a constant state of evolution in order to accommodate my students and improve their learning in my classroom, therefore altering and enhancing my views and methods as an instructor.
Chapter 3—Sympathy, Scruples, and Sexual Innuendo: Responding to Student Texts

After struggling to portray an authoritative demeanor to my students through my appearance and syllabus, dealing with unexpected competition and discipline problems in the classroom, and realizing that my ideal community classroom does not exist without tremendous effort, it would seem that the steps after the first draft of an essay is completed—peer review workshops and my own responses—would be comparatively easy. Yet it is in these types of communication that the students continue in developing their relationships with one another and with me. Through revision with their peers they learn what each of the members of their group looks at in an essay, what they are good at editing, and what they need help with, and they must have enough trust in and respect for these group members to share their writing and, often, parts of their personal lives, thoughts, and beliefs. When they turn in a rough or final draft of an essay to me, they must trust me with all of this—perhaps an even more difficult endeavor, as I may seem like someone who cannot relate to them as the other students could. On top of that, they must consider the possibility that I will not agree with their point of view, or their use of cuss words, or the fact that they wrote about how their girlfriend got unexpectedly pregnant. In essence, they have to let me in and trust that I will be fair, and that can be terrifying for a freshman writing student in a new environment such as college, where they are already in such a state of insecurity and upheaval. So choosing the best route to implement peer revision and explaining how you, as the instructor, respond to essays is integral to successful relationships within the classroom.

Around a month into class my first semester teaching, I told the students we would be having a peer review workshop the next class period. The specifics were in the
syllabus, so it did not come as a surprise to them. I spent that class talking to them about peer review; many of them had experienced some form of it in high school—although few had had a positive experience. Several of the more outspoken students complained that they hated peer review because their peers didn’t know any more than they did about writing, so why should they listen to them? Good point.

I value peer review for several reasons. I think it is beneficial to have as many people read one’s work as possible. Different perspectives mean one gets a broader idea of how one’s ideas and thoughts affect others and if the intended meaning is apparent to them or not. Peer review is also essential to forming relationships with other students. But those students did have a point—and I thought I knew why they had that idea.

Many writing instructors may begin peer review with the idea that students already know how it works, so very little preparation is needed before the workshop begins. I discussed with my students reading one another’s essays to themselves or aloud, to be respectful of one another’s feelings but critical at the same time, to look at overall themes, ideas, format, and mechanics. But when the workshops were completed, the students had very little feedback of substance and more information on which of them were attending the kegger later that evening.

What is wrong with this approach is that the students need quite a bit of direction in peer review, and while some instructors will argue that they give an abundance of direction, I will also argue that the students need more information on why peer review is important. While you might give them your opinion on peer review and its significance—I did—you might also do what Fiona Paton, relying on Bruffee’s research, suggests: “Point out that teamwork is now the norm in business and industry, and that
employers routinely complain that college graduates are not only too dependent and passive, but are also competitive rather than cooperative in the workplace. Relating what the students are doing in class to their ultimate goal of graduating and being in the workforce could encourage them to look at peer review from a different viewpoint—one that makes peer review more productive and less painful. Paton also says that the students can begin to “see themselves as generating rather than passively receiving knowledge in their discussions of each other’s writing.” While these ideas seem sound, it is important to note that the word “competition” is once again used here in a negative way. Those “on the outside,” in the workforce, have deemed competition in business fruitless and undesirable. Or, as Lad Tobin posits, “At some point, we designated competition a ‘Devil term,’ and collaboration a ‘God term,’ without worrying about the fact that people sometimes collaborate to do terrible things or compete to do good.” In peer review, for example, we are trying to use the collaborative aspect of working together in a group to bring about a better essay for each of the participants. Yet Tom Romano has a similarly negative opinion of what can happen when competition hovers in a peer review group: “If the sharing and pacing among students devolve into vicious competition, then the creative atmosphere can turn stressful, crippling, and counterproductive. The pressure on students to compete with and beat each other will inhibit creativity, will make risking anything too dangerous.” At some point in time we decided that competition and collaboration were “mutually exclusive” and bad for composition. Apparently, what we as writing teachers needed to figure out (as if it were that easy) was how to have a peer review workshop that used common student competition in a collaborative format. In other words, how could we encourage the idea
that the competition one feels as a student to do well, get the desired grade or outcome, and/or to feel that they are a competent writer in the eyes of the other students can be cultivated through collaboration with those same students during peer review? The underlying competition the students feel with one another could (I say, hopefully) propel them toward cooperation in the peer review as they use one another’s strongest skills to better their own writing. Using Donald Murray’s beginning for every class workshop, “How can we help you?” could be the springboard each group needs to use one another’s talents for their own and the greater good. So, while it is imperative that the instructor lead the students through their responsibilities as peer reviewers, and even tell them reasons why peer review is important, it might also be helpful to discuss the competition that everyone is so silent about, and show the students what they can gain from one another and consequently help themselves.

Despite the unimpressive outcome of my first class’s first peer review, I was still determined to understand what they thought about it, what worked for them and what didn’t, and to figure out why. I surveyed that first class after only one peer review to get their thoughts, and the responses were varied but enlightening. While most of the students agreed that they liked having several more people than the teacher read their essay, they weren’t sure that they benefitted much from it. As Kacey wrote: “I think if everybody puts a significant amount of thought into other’s papers then it is a good way to revise your paper. Although, when your peers do not put their full effort into editing your paper I feel it is a useless exercise.” Many students were unsure of their own ability to revise because they have problems being critical, or, as another student wrote, because they think “an older person knows more than [they] do.” The solution to these common
concerns is in the teacher’s ability to show the students what kinds of comments are helpful—and to help the student gain confidence in their own ability to look at a work and tell what they think about it.

A concern that another student, Dawn, offered depends upon those relationships the students have—or do not have—with one another. She said, “I don’t like the way it feels like people are judging my piece or me because they have read my piece.” While Dawn ultimately favored peer review, it was the beginning of the semester and the few people she knew in class were not in her workshop group, so she did not feel comfortable sharing her personal views with those that were in her group. This problem might vanish as the semester progresses and the students get to know one another on a more personal level through group activities and class discussions, or it might help to keep students with the same group the entire semester so they’ll feel more comfortable sharing with them. However, some students just feel less comfortable sharing their lives with one another than they do with an instructor—an interesting occurrence, since one would think that the student would feel more comfortable with someone they could relate to. However, when I was a student I felt the same way—I felt less judged by the instructor (who, I figured, had to remain fairly neutral about things and had seen far more than the people my age) than by the other students. Perhaps the competition Dawn and I both felt comparing ourselves with the other students was too great for us to feel comfortable with peer review (although, with practice, my fears vanished). Or perhaps the relationship we each had with our instructor was stronger, at that point in the semester, than with our peers.

Dawn’s reservations about peer review surfaced again the following semester, with Katee, another freshman composition student. Katee was outgoing and blunt;
always sat in the front row and was not afraid to share her opinion with the class. She rolled her brown eyes often at the other students who complained about getting in the discussion circle, and she participated in group work efficiently. I liked her immediately. During that class’s peer review, Katee handed me a copy of the essay she was having reviewed.

“Will you make some suggestions on this, too?” she asked. I agreed and set to work on it. After I finished looking at Katee’s essay, I handed it back to her and proceeded to walk around the other groups, listening here and answering a question there. When I got back to Katee’s table, her group was apparently finished and she was scrutinizing the copy I had responded to.

“Why do you keep asking me to explain these parts more? Can’t I just say it and leave it at that?” she asked with a furrowed brow.

“No—not if you want your audience to understand you. When you make a comment that something is like something else and then don’t explain why, it just leaves your reader confused,” I replied.

“But I don’t wanna tell you why meeting Chad was like serendipity. And you already read the essay about color guard, so you know why it was serendipitous.” Her essay was a definition of the word “serendipity,” and while I did know why her experience in the color guard was serendipitous, I tried to explain that her other readers would not.

“Okay,” Katee relented, “I’ll add the stuff about the color guard. But I really don’t wanna include the part about Chad.”

I had to ask—“Why?”
Katee’s dark eyes widened, showing white all around the pupil. “Because then you’ll *know* me!” Katee responded exasperatedly.

Katee’s refusal to let me in to her personal life is another issue for writing teachers—and one that is on the other end of the spectrum from those students who will go into great detail telling you all about themselves and their problems. I could help Katee by telling her that she did not have to include the part about her relationship with Chad; she would just have to omit it as an example altogether or find a way to overcome her resistance to telling the whole story when she made a personal example. But what about the other type: the ones who had no qualms laying it all out on the table?

On another peer review day, the group directly in front of my desk erupted into laughter and hand-over-mouth “Oh my goshes.” I looked up curiously into Tyrel’s brown eyes as his shoulders shook.

“Miz Swan—son!” Tyrel bit out his customary greeting to get my attention.

“They’re saying I can’t say what I did in my essay!”

I raised an eyebrow at Tyrel’s group members, Katee, Jenny, and Lana. Katee, of course, spoke up first: “It’s kind of—dirty.”

“Yeah—he’s not supposed to put, uhm, sexual-type stuff in here, is he? I mean, it’s kind of vulgar,” Jenny said timidly, biting her lip.

Perplexed, I asked what exactly she meant by “vulgar.”

“Well, it’s just describing a certain sexual act that sounds rude,” Lana jumped in, saving Jenny and her red face.

“But it’s how it happened! That’s what he *said*!” Tyrel defended. “Aren’t I supposed to write it like it happened?”
“Well—yes, if it’s relevant and moves your story along, or makes a point about something . . .” I replied, hesitant because I wasn’t sure what they were talking about exactly. “But if it’s overly rude, Tyrel, is it really necessary in the story? I mean, is it derogatory?”

Tyrel grabbed the essay off his desk and thrust it at me. “No! It’s supposed to be there because it shows how I felt about what Ben said.”

I read the excerpt and relaxed a bit. While it was an appreciative comment about a particular feature of a girl’s anatomy and had sexual implications, it wasn’t quite as dramatic as the girls had made it out. The remark, made by one of Tyrel’s friends in the story, was necessary to show Tyrel’s emotions because of his reaction to the comment. “Okay—I think you’re right, Tyrel.” I returned the paper to Tyrel as he preened in front of his group members.

Tyrel’s ease with giving every tiny detail for his classmates and me to read is not abnormal in freshman essays. The key in this situation, I think, is to learn how to respond. That may be the most confusing and frightening part of being a first-time teacher: knowing that each of these students’ grades lies in your hands, and that your responses to their thoughts could mean they like or hate you. While that probably should not be the concern of teachers, I think it is safe to say that most teachers, especially first-time teachers, want their students to like and respect them. And there is no easier way to make or break a relationship with a student than with your responses to their essays. I empathized with Lisa Ede when she said,

I wanted my students not only to improve as writers but to like the class. My comments on their essays would, I feared, break the upward momentum—the increased self-confidence, optimism, and enthusiasm—I had struggled to generate in my students. As I read their first essays, then,
I found myself worrying about their responses to my responses, even before I had written them.  

Responding to student essays was, admittedly, one of the last things on my mind when I began teaching freshman composition. I was too worried about how I would be perceived, how the students would respond to me in class, what I would do in each class. Once I got to the point where I had a fresh stack of forty-four essays piled on my coffee table, I became immediately overwhelmed—not even necessarily by the responses I would make, but by the sheer volume of those responses. It was after I began reading that I confronted the difficulty in the responses themselves.  

The problem was that I not only had to respond to the essays, I had to grade them as well—I think it is important to highlight the difference between the two. This was their “final” draft after their peers’ responses. And I must be honest here: as a first-time teacher and a graduate student at the same time, I had structured my class so that I rarely saw the actual drafts until their final stage. I went through prewriting with the students and talked to them about their ideas, and later they had peer review. While I did tell the students that I would be happy to look over their rough drafts, very few actually took me up on the offer. Because of a lack of time on my part, I thought it best simply to respond to the final drafts and give a grade, hoping that they would actually read my comments and take them into account when—well, if—they revised. But if, as Peter Elbow says, it is “feedback that is indispensable for learning,” then I think I let the students down with this structure. My feedback on drafts might have helped shape their overall ideas in the final draft and perhaps helped them learn more in the process.  

There are several responding and grading categories one can delve into with a student essay in hand. As defined by Elbow, one can evaluate, grade, and/or give
feedback on essays. Yet often, because our culture puts such an emphasis on scores, grades, and testing, teachers find themselves writing their evaluations and feedback in order to justify the grade they give an essay, rather than writing what they think will be most beneficial to the student’s revision or learning. While Elbow acknowledges that a grade is often needed and that we should not get rid of grading or “summative evaluation,” he proposes that portfolios might be a way of making grading less damaging to the student’s desire to learn and to make those grades as accurate as possible. Yet, as a fairly recent high school graduate and product of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which requires that all graduating seniors produce a portfolio made up of essays in varying genres from different classes that is ultimately “graded” on a scale from “novice” through “distinguished,” I can vouch for my own students (who would undoubtedly moan and complain about the idea of more portfolios) when I say that the year after having to produce such a thing is not a good year to attempt to implement one again. Most of my Kentucky students—and perhaps students from other states, with equivalents to the portfolio—come into their first English class since high school thinking that writing “sucks” because of their frustrating experience with these portfolios. Their entire senior year is marred with trying to find a suitable essay to fit a certain description in the portfolio mandates, and even though their writing is supposed to follow them from seventh grade on, they usually end up having to write several new essays to fit these criteria. They enter my classroom their freshman year of college burned out, and I see it as my duty to revive and refresh their ideas of writing. So, while I believe Elbow’s suggestion is acceptable for older students, or perhaps even students that do not experience KERA in high school, I do not find it conducive to my own classroom. The
KERA portfolios are just one example of what is out there to overcome in states across the U.S., and changing our students’ mindsets about portfolios (and other high school English practices) might take more time than a first-year composition course allows.

Because I was otherwise engaged with my own graduate classes and essays I had to write, I tackled the first batch of essays a few days after I actually received them. The one thing I underestimated about responding to student essays from the beginning was the amount of time it took—and perhaps the fact that the longer it went on, the more like work it became. Like Ede and others, I came to understand the need to “complain about the papers [I] had to grade.” And the time it took for each essay—which my classes preparing me to teach and the online FaCET modules I became certified in before teaching said should be about fifteen to twenty minutes an essay—was much longer than I anticipated. Like Norm Katz, I found that “for every hour I spent teaching in the classroom I spent five hours reading student papers [. . .]—five slow, difficult hours.”

As I sat cross-legged on my loveseat, cup of coffee beside me and the television creating soft background noise, I read through the first few essays (responding yet not assigning any grades), and I thought about the different methods I had learned for grading essays. I could create a rubric like the FaCET modules and St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing suggested, which could be helpful in “communicating with students and in ensuring that your evaluation process is as fair and consistent as possible.” But I was afraid that, with a rubric, the essays after my first use of one would end up sounding like cookie-cutter copies of one another, all striving to meet the requirements of the rubric. Also, there was so much more to look for in a student essay than possible “mistakes”; I wanted to attempt to read for content and ideas. But I also had to consider
length, thesis, coherence. I wanted to do all this without producing what Nancy Sommers termed “rubber-stamped” comments “interchangeable from text to text, not text-specific.”

Assessment is also a form of comparison, so I figured I had to know how each of the essays compared with one another and how each of the students’ work compared to work earlier in the semester (a tricky endeavor as this was the first batch of essays). The question of how to compare each student is one that weighs heavily on an instructor’s mind, and we might ask ourselves “Will the good writer who shows little improvement receive the same grade as the poor writer who shows much improvement but who nevertheless still writes worse than the good writer?” The answer to the question, according to many composition scholars, is not to view successful writing as applicable to the broader concept of ability, but to assess each application of skill in “particular texts for particular audiences.” In other words, how well did the writer apply his or her skills to this essay and for the audience they envisioned?

After sifting through some of the essays in front of me, I came to one I had been dreading reading. Better to get it over with now, I thought as I began scanning the first sentences. It was a sort of “Coming to America” story without the laughs from the movie; a tale my only ESL (English as a Second Language) student, Cham, had written about his journey from the Sudan to the United States. The reason I dreaded it wasn’t the content; it was the mechanics of the writing. I was used to ESL writing from working as a tutor in the Writing Center, and I knew a great deal of concentration on my part was usually warranted for their reading. ESL writers usually wanted a tutor to “fix” the grammatical mistakes, which often ended up in a full re-write of many sentences and
long conversations about what they meant to say. It was tiring—and moreso when I didn’t have Cham in front of me to talk to about the essay. I had to do it all in writing.

The week before the essay was due, Cham showed up at my office door and asked to talk about it. “I have some problems with grammar and things, but I know what I want to write about and I will do what I need to to get a good grade here. I want to learn everything I can,” Cham began, his dark eyes sincere.

“Okay, good. I can meet with you before your essay is due to look at it if you want, or you might make an appointment at the Writing Center. They often help with grammar problems,” I replied. I was excited that Cham seemed to have so much interest in learning—it unfortunately was not the norm among college students to actually do everything they could to soak up and then apply the knowledge they gained from the classroom. He came back to talk to me another time before the essay was due, and we discussed his past in the Sudan military, his opportunity to come to the U.S., and his eventual place in the military here. Cham had been through a great deal in his life, but he didn’t seem to want sympathy or outrage at what he had to go through as a child soldier—he just wanted to tell the story. I attempted to get him to include details about his time in the Sudanese military just to show his reader what he was talking about—assuming his audience were those who had no prior experience with the Sudanese military—but he was reluctant to do so. “I just don’t want to go too far into it . . .” he said calmly. “It was pretty bad. I was a young boy in the army there.” I was intrigued by Cham’s quiet dignity, and of course I wanted the details of his life like anyone reading his story or hearing about his life would.
"I know it must be hard. But one thing I do like to tell students is that sometimes the best writing is that which is difficult to write. It’s up to you, but I do think it would help make your story more clear and vibrant if you added details to put us there with you," I said, trying to be supportive, wanting the details but at the same time afraid that it would cause him pain to relive them. That really wasn’t something I wanted to be responsible for because of an essay.

When I started reading Cham’s essay, expecting to have to wade through muddy prose to get to a main idea or real supporting details, I was surprised to find that I was immediately drawn into the narrative. I put the green ink pen down and simply read the story as I would a piece of literature—and quite unlike the way I usually read student texts. I ignored problems with syntax and grammar and simply read the story of Cham’s difficult, scary, often heroic life. And it was so engaging—he included details about marching through the desert with no shoes as a child soldier and having to carry his younger brother part of the way, his family being broken up by the war in the Sudan, and the atrocities he experienced and witnessed there. It was moving. Sure, there were problems with the story—parts that left me confused, places that needed more explanation and parts that could’ve been moved around for more clarity. Reading it with a pen in hand would have resulted in green ink all over the paper—if I marked every grammatical and sentence-level error. But overall, Cham had something there. So I made comments, pointed out a few of his most common mistakes, and gave him a grade. I was pleased.

Now tell me why I reverted to the pen-in-hand responding when I picked up the next student’s essay.
I believe my inability to see student writing as a piece of literature or a text worthy of the reading I would give professional writing is largely dependent on my own pre-conceived notions of what it means to be a teacher. Even after all that I had learned about composition studies and pedagogy and contemporary writing theories I still somehow equated the teacher with the role of assessor. I thought the students’ ultimate need and my ultimate goal was to give the grade. Like Lad Tobin, I was reading these essays “against a mental template I ha[d] constructed—content, style, length, correctness.” For Tobin, it took observation of Donald Murray’s innovative composition practices to jar him into the reality of changing his reading approach. I wish I had had that opportunity. If I had let myself reflect on my approach and pre-conceived beliefs for any amount of time at all, I think (or at least hope) that I would have realized that the grade is not the goal we are striving for in each writing class. But for me, it took Cham’s essay and the recognition that I had actually enjoyed reading it to make me understand that perhaps that could be done with all of my student essays—and that understanding did not come immediately. I still felt that, since I was responding to the “final” draft of these essays, the students needed conclusive comments as well as those with suggestions for revision. I still believed that while there was potential in the draft, since it was their “final” one I should treat it as such and grade the product, not the potential the product could achieve. I am still unsure that this compulsion of mine is completely wrong, simply because all of the ideas Tobin, Murray and others present seem to hinge on the fact that the instructor is responding to a draft—not the draft, the final one. So perhaps what I am suggesting here is not that my initial reasoning for assessing
the essays is incorrect, given that I was responding to the final draft of said essays, but that the responses should come much earlier than mine did, before the final draft is due.

While reading Elizabeth Flynn’s “Learning to Read Student Papers from a Feminine Perspective,” I realized that I took on both the masculine and feminine roles of reading those student drafts. When I read Cham’s essay, I automatically allowed myself (because I thought his would be more difficult to read and would require more concentration) to take on my natural reading stance, what Flynn calls the feminine role, “oscillat[ing] in a productive way between the opposite poles of empathy and judgment, identification and detachment.” Yet when I moved on to the other students’ papers, I reverted back to an unnatural, and therefore frustrating and difficult, way of reading. I took on what Flynn terms the more male mode of reading, becoming “fixated at either extreme, [. . .] dominat[ing] texts by judging them overharshly or rejecting them” or “becoming entangled in textual detail or identifying too strongly with characters or situations described in them.” Rather than sympathizing with the writer and his or her story, as I normally would while reading, I judged them in order to justify a grade. And while my “judgments” might not have been overly harsh or unsympathetic, they did not always focus on the content of the text—they focused on the text as a product. While I do believe it is possible to look at the content of a piece even in its “final” form and be sympathetic (I did so with Cham’s essay), what I am saying here is that I believe it is more beneficial for the student’s overall learning and ability to revise to do so before the final draft is due.

This sympathy Flynn advocates is touted further by editor and teacher Michael Spooner. When connecting his ideas about the profession of editing and composition
studies Spooner said, “For me, one of the hardest ideas to convey to students is that editing (I would argue that any response to writing) works best when it proceeds from a stance of sympathy or alignment with the writer—not from a stance of Correction or Remediation.” That was what I needed to learn about responding to student writing. I had accomplished it with Cham, but had yet to do it with my other students. However, once I realized that writing questions and answers in the margins, editing everything I could find throughout the paper, and providing a lengthy end comment to justify the grade was, as Tobin describes, “exhausting” and “almost physically painful,” I knew that I had to revise my response process. I had read a few things on composition theory since I first began teaching, and decided to try to read the text as I would a book or magazine article I had just picked up for pleasure. In doing so, my grading process went from thirty minutes a paper to maybe twenty. I delivered less marginal comments, but provided more questions for the author to respond to. I edited much less—maybe only for the first couple pages. And I wrote end comments that praised the strengths of the essay and suggested areas to build on or expand. I felt, like Tobin, that “from the moment I started reading drafts for potential rather than for assessment, my relationship to my students and my sense of myself as a writing teacher changed in fundamental and exhilarating ways.” I was excited for my students to read what I wrote for them; I wanted them to ask me questions and get excited themselves about revising their work. I realized I was a little naïve to want that, but I couldn’t help but be optimistic—I was so much more satisfied with my responses that I just knew they would be as well. The students who had me read their rough drafts several times before turning in a final draft benefitted most from my new response method—they even commented on how helpful
my questions and marginal comments were. And when I began responding to a short rough draft before the final draft was due I did receive—in most cases—a more polished, cohesive final copy. There were students who did not put the effort into the rough draft that they could have and therefore benefitted little from my comments, but I think overall my responses were more helpful. They worked better for me, at least, and that mattered quite a bit.

Responding to student texts is something that I think I will always be attempting to perfect. The first step, though, is seeking to understand the writer and what he or she is trying to say. Something I must keep in mind as an instructor is that the standard or expected way of writing something is not always the only way. Although I find it easy to remember that when reading professional or scholarly writing, I need to remind myself of it in student texts. I have to keep in mind that these students come from varying backgrounds, cultures, and often, countries. There are challenges to overcome when responding to such a blend of perspectives—and the best way to go about that is simply to remember it. Spooner says that the

first challenge of editorial response to writing, like teacherly response, is not to correct a text toward what the handbooks or readability indices allow, but to understand the writer’s ideas and processes. After that, the job is to imagine small ways to help the writer deliver those ideas effectively. I’d argue that such a sympathy for the text is fundamental to the ethics of response.49

I agree that having sympathy for the text—whether it is in a feminine way of responding, as Flynn posits, or whether it is simply in an effort to interpret student texts in a more realistic way, as Tobin suggests—is imperative to finding the right roles for us as responders. And once we create these roles that support a more nuanced and flexible way of thinking about student texts, we can teach our students how to do the same in their
peer workshops. Their learning the best ways to read other students’ writing is determined by our own strategies and approaches.
Chapter 4—Excuses, Evasions, and Absenteeism

Alex sauntered into the second day of my eight o’clock composition class ten minutes late, a silver motorcycle helmet under one arm. He plopped into the last seat in the first row of desks and leaned back, his black T-shirt stretching taut across his chest as he stared idly at me. I ignored his late entrance but made a note of it in my attendance book. Alex remained silent through discussion and the rest of class, and when I dismissed them, he picked up his helmet and backpack and escaped, the first one out the door. He had never even gotten a notebook or pen out of his bag.

As the semester progressed, it became a habit of mine to wonder what Alex was thinking behind those dark, serious eyes and somber black brows. He rarely smiled, yet the journals he turned in to me contained a sarcastic, cynical humor impressive for a writer his age—which I ironically later found out was my age. His style was also impressive; not yet remarkable, but interesting and fairly error-free, at least. It was predictable to only have Alex present for two of the three classes in a week; he skipped often, without explanation, and was also late regularly. Since he had no interest in speaking to me about his absences, I assumed he just did not care. It wasn’t as if he participated in class; he remained aloof with the other students even in group work and only put forth the minimum effort that was required of him to get by. He seemed to be just another bored, apathetic male college student.

After they turned in their first out-of-class essays, the students scheduled conferences with me to discuss their writing and progress in class so far. The day of Alex’s conference, he wandered into my office and sat facing me in the chair opposite my desk. As we talked, I learned that he was interested in travel and comic books, and that
he did not actually hate my class as I feared.

“I work forty hours a week at night, so it's kinda difficult to roll outta bed for your class at eight, you know?” He smiled sheepishly and shrugged.

“Well, Alex,” I began, looking over his attendance and grades, “You have good grades on everything you've turned in, almost all A's so far, but your attendance is going to bring your overall grade down if you don't watch it. Remember you only get six absences before your grade comes down a letter for each one missed thereafter. You've already missed five classes.”

Alex's normally hooded eyes widened. “Seriously? Wow, I'm glad you told me that. I really didn't know. I'll try harder to be in class from now on.”

“I hope you do. You've got great potential as a writer, Alex. I would hate for you to get a grade in here that is lower than what you earn on your essays just because of your attendance,” I replied.

The rest of the semester, Alex became more of an involved student—he didn't do a complete turnaround, but he participated more often in groups, got to know some of the other students, turned in excellent essays that were well thought-out and descriptive, and attended class. He did, however, miss a few more classes. His excuses, at least, were not made-up justifications of why he could not attend—no, usually they were emails that began with some self-deprecating subject (my favorite was “I hate myself”)—and ended simply with an acknowledgement that he missed class and that he was sorry. At least he was keeping in touch, but I was nervous about his final grade after all these absences and emails.

In my first year of teaching I was subjected to a host of excuses from students.
Sometimes they were for missing class—although on the syllabus I told them that I did not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, so it did not matter why they were not attending, yet I continued to receive them regardless. They were also for missed assignments or problems with a class date conflicting with another engagement—usually a funeral or sorority, fraternity, or sporting event. Even with an attendance policy—which, I admit, did alleviate cases of only five students showing up on a rainy day—sometimes it was frustrating dealing with those students who missed so many classes and then acted as if it were my job to fill them in on everything they missed. It made me want to hand out Tom Wayman’s poem, “Did I Miss Anything: Questions frequently asked by students after missing a class”:

Nothing. When we realized you weren’t here we sat with our hands folded on our desks in silence, for the full two hours

   Everything. I gave an exam worth 40 per cent of the grade for this term and assigned some reading due today on which I’m about to hand out a quiz worth 50 per cent

Nothing. None of the content of this course has value or meaning Take as many days off as you like any activities we undertake as a class I assure you will not matter either to you or me and are without purpose

   Everything. A few minutes after we began last time a shaft of light descended and an angel or other heavenly being appeared and revealed to us what each woman or man must do to attain divine wisdom in this life and the hereafter This is the last time the class will meet
before we disperse to bring this good news to all people
on earth

Nothing. When you are not present
how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom
is a microcosm of human existence
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder
This is not the only place such an opportunity has been
gathered

but it was one place

And you weren’t here\(^50\)

Wayman’s poem articulates all of the sarcastic thoughts I repeated in my mind every time
I got a request from an absent student for missed work—not usually when they had
missed class for a legitimate reason, but often when they had no excuse and came to me
three days later with the request. However, attendance was not usually one of my
greatest concerns throughout the semester, especially compared to my other classroom
concerns. At least I never received a phone call or email from a parent telling me why
their son or daughter did not attend my class last week, like some of the other graduate
assistants. I was spared that particular awkward conversation. Yet once the semester
started wrapping up, I inevitably had to consider those excuses when determining final
grades. Even though I had stated that I did not distinguish between absences in the
syllabus, I had also left them with the understanding that I knew “life happened,” so I
would take that into consideration if they missed more than the maximum amount of
classes allowed because of an illness or death.

As it states in *The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing*, “that final grade next
to a student’s name represents your ultimate judgment on that student, usually the only
That judgment I had to make included all of the points the students had earned from each of their essays, journals, quizzes, and participation throughout the semester. The participation heading has a list that falls under it that includes class participation in discussion and groups, class and conference attendance, workshop performance, willingness to try. While for some students there is no question that they will receive the maximum points possible, for others that is not as clear. It is my final call as to whose grades change for the better because of their participation and whose change for the worse—and that can be daunting. I want to be objective, like teachers are supposed to, according to all of the surveys the students fill out grading their teachers at the end of the semester (e.g., “Was your instructor objective according to age, race, gender, ability . . ?”). But that is awfully difficult when you know the students. Some of them really do have valid excuses for missing classes, and some of them gave the class great effort. So how do you judge which ones get the good grades—and which don’t?

Donald Murray touts that we should be fair, not necessarily objective, because we cannot be completely objective when we know the people we are grading, or have experience with the situation they write about. It is true that being objective is nearly impossible when you are involved personally with a person or situation. According to Brock Dethier, “fairness [ . . . ] is openly, admittedly, subjective and situational.” I had to deal with not only the grades the students earned, but also the participation and the excuses. While I could always rely on my shield, the syllabus, to allocate the grades according to my attendance policy, I had a difficult time deciding if that was fair when some of the students had legitimate life problems for missing class (like deaths in the
family) and others had mere excuses (like “my roommate got drunk and puked all night, keeping me awake”). Skipping class is a common problem in college that I attempted to dissuade my students from with an attendance policy on the syllabus—but obviously, as in the case with Alex, it still occurred.

When anthropologist professor Rebekah Nathan conducted an ethnographic study of college students as an undercover student herself, she experienced the “real” life that happens as a student—and among other things, began to understand the reasons why students skipped classes. Usually it was an act of poor time management, but sometimes when she also skipped a class, she noticed that the positive reactions she got from the other students proved that “moderate cutting was part of college culture, and it marked me as [...] someone who understood the value of self-determination combined with a touch of rebellion.”

Nathan also found that in national surveys, “one-third of students report skipping classes occasionally or more,” a figure she found to be much lower than the actual average. Nathan found in her experience as a student that students with five to six classes, part or full-time jobs, and some semblance of a social life skipped classes as a matter of priority—something else was simply more important at that time. While that is understandable, as an instructor I must look at my own expectations of the students—their inability to manage their time is not, essentially, my problem. But that didn’t stop me from feeling guilty when I had to consider giving them a low grade.

When it came time to turn in final grades, I had to go over and over my guilt with Alex. He had missed too many classes to pass my class with the attendance policy—but his work was all “A” quality. He was actually the best writer in the class—fresh, humorous, appropriately researched and analyzed. I hated to fail him because of his
attendance when he had to work forty hours a week at night to survive. I was torn—and it only got worse when I received an email from him with his final paper attached that read, “Ms. Swanson, I know that I have missed a lot of classes because of work, and I understand if I don’t pass because of it, but PLEASE pass me with a ‘C’!” I knew I should stick to my policy as outlined in my syllabus, but I hated to do that when his work was not the problem. Yet I also did not want to be unethical about the whole thing: if I passed Alex with a “C” when he deserved an “F” because of my policy, then I would have to afford the other students the same luxury. So I did. My guilt was relieved, and so was Alex.

The next semester I had a similar problem with a female student in my afternoon class; however, it was essentially a problem that required little thought on my part as to how to deal with it, as in Alex’s case. Rachel was an offbeat, hip girl with two-toned hair, a nose ring, and a passion for vocabulary words—no kidding. She loved creative writing and was excited about doing some in my class, a fact she told me when she hung back the first day to chat. I was excited to have an English lover in the bunch. Rachel, however, had attendance problems from the beginning. After the second week I saw her less and less, and she rarely turned in journals or was there for quizzes. When her rough draft for her narrative was due, I responded to it and gave it back to her with some suggestions for putting her audience in the moment with her and more description, which she gladly accepted.

“I’m so glad I’m in this class because most other teachers just worry about spelling and grammar and punctuation, but you’re talking about what I’m saying and how to make it sound better and clearer. That is so great!” she exclaimed as we walked down
the marble steps after class. I was flattered that she liked it, until the due date appeared and disappeared with no Rachel in class and no essay in my hand. I wondered if she was one of those students who talks to the instructor to pad their grade since they think they might not be doing as well as they’d like. Not that she sucked up, but . . . I wasn’t sure.

Rachel appeared in class the day of our in-class essay, the week after her narrative was due. After class she stayed behind to explain where she’d been the last week. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to turn in my essay. My dad kicked me out of the house and made me give him my key, but I wasn’t allowed to get any of my stuff and my laptop was in there, along with all my clothes and stuff. I’ve been sleeping at a friend’s.”

“Wow. Okay . . . Well, you are losing points right now, so get it to me as soon as possible so you can still get a grade.” I replied. Her explanation was off-the-wall, but at least she’d tried to talk to me about it. Some students didn’t even bother with that. I realized she could have been making it up—I wasn’t that naïve—but since she knew she was losing points, I did not see the point in making a big deal of it. It was her grade.

“I understand. I think I can sneak back into the house while my dad’s at work and get my laptop back tomorrow. I’ll send it to you as soon as I do,” she replied, gathering her green satchel and walking out of the room, her black Chuck Taylor’s squeaking on the linoleum.

I received Rachel’s essay a few days later, but her attendance remained sketchy until, once again, it was time for conferences. I gave her the same spiel I had given Alex, and she promised that she would attend every class from there until the last day to get the credit in class. And, surprisingly, she did. Rachel never missed a class after that conference. However, she failed to turn in three essays. She had missed one before the
conferences, but I told her she would still be able to pass if she worked hard and turned in
the others. She promised she would.

During a group activity where they shared their ideas for the persuasive essay
with one another, I walked around to Rachel’s table.

“What are we thinking about doing here?” I asked.

“I am so excited about my topic. I’m going to argue that music should be free on
the internet and we shouldn’t be charged for the songs we download. . . .” Rachel went on
to give reason after reason why she thought this, holding up her long list of brainstormed
ideas for me to see. I listened to the other members and moved on, thinking Rachel had
gotten back into the groove of things. Sometimes freshman year is just hard, and people
need adjustment time. Maybe Rachel was past that now.

The due date for the persuasive essay came, and I realized when responding to
essays that Rachel’s was not in the stack. I approached her after the next class and asked
about it, to which she responded, “Oh, I know. I’ll have it to you the next class; I was
just working so hard on it and I was so excited about it that I wasn’t ready to turn it in
yet.”

The next class I still did not receive an essay from Rachel—although she
continued to attend class. I told her she could still email it to me; she hadn’t lost all the
points quite yet, and some were better than none. She promised she would. She didn’t.
Finally, it got to the point where I had to tell Rachel not to bother; she wouldn’t be
receiving any points for the essay because it was so late. Yet she continued to come to
class every day.

After the last class of the semester, Rachel came by my desk to say goodbye as
some students filed past, handing in their essays a few days before the actual due date.

“‘You’re gonna love my research paper. The first paragraph is awesome; I worked forever on it!’” she said.

“Sounds great, Rachel,” I replied. “I can’t wait to read it.” I assumed it would be in the box on my office door by the due date. Of course, it wasn’t. I did not have as many qualms about Rachel’s grade as I did Alex’s; while she did come to class, she did not do the work. Of course she wouldn’t pass. Although I still wonder why she bothered to come to every class if she was not going to turn anything in. The best laid plans, I guess. While I assume Rachel had enough intelligence to know that she would not pass my class simply for showing up, one really never knows what students expect from their teachers. Alison Knoblauch says that she has found that a few of her students believe she grades too hard because she expects more than the minimum from them. She says, “I should barely expect the minimum from my students, I should barely expect them to turn in all their assignments on time and to show up to class, yet when I do receive this minimum amount of effort at least some of my students expect to be rewarded for it.”

I agree with Knoblauch’s evident derision at such expectations; students will not be rewarded for the minimum amount of work, attendance, or effort. While I do believe that some students have honest, legitimate excuses—life does happen, and I can understand that—some are just out there to do the minimum, make up the excuse, and get the grade. Excuses are abundant throughout college classes of all kinds, and while some instructors choose to be cynical about all excuses, I still believe that we should afford the students some kind of respect that they are being honest—especially if they can prove it or if they have never given you, as an instructor, any reason to doubt them otherwise. Perhaps that
is the young teacher in me speaking—I have not yet had enough experience with these excuses to become hardened to them. But I would like to think it is simply me being me—a person who will always attempt to see the best in others, until they are proven otherwise. Optimistically realistic—that is what I like to call it.

The bar was loud with jukebox tunes—The Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” blared incessantly—and the smoke curled its way to the wooden rafters of the ceiling. It was my graduation night from graduate school, and the other assistants and I were out to celebrate. While waiting in line at the bar for a cocktail, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned. Alex stood before me, smiling (for once). “Hey—you were my English teacher last semester!” he exclaimed.

I laughed—it’s always a little awkward when you see your students out in the “real world,” but even more so at a bar, holding a cocktail. “Yes, I was. How are you, Alex?”

“Oh, fine. Working. Hanging out here too much. Hey, you passed me with a ‘C,’ too!” Alex’s usually eloquent language was watered down with too much beer and too loud music.

“I did at that,” I yelled. “You worked a lot at night, so I understood that.”

Alex quirked a smile. “Yeah, and I hung out here too much.”

I stood there silently for a split second, dismayed. “I don’t want to hear that, Alex! Don’t tell me that now, after I passed you!”

“Oh, sorry! Well, I was at work most of the time. I had a hard time waking up. No more eight o’clock classes for me,” he replied. We chatted for a moment and said our goodbyes.
What a way to close my graduate career. I guess I was wrong about the reasons Alex had for skipping class—at least some of the time—but I didn’t regret passing him. He had accomplished more than what was expected of him on his course requirements minus attendance, so I decided I would not feel guilty at this late juncture—I would not let all my fears that I was an inexperienced, inadequate, unknowledgeable instructor overwhelm me as they might have in the beginning of my teaching career. I believed Alex when he told me he was working late every time he missed class because I had no proof otherwise—and I had no reason to doubt him, because he turned in all of his work in a timely manner and otherwise participated and was engaged while in class. He took my advice in our conference and, although he still missed some classes, he became a part of the class. His final grade, I believe, should reflect his effort on the work he submitted. But final grades, regardless of attendance issues, are often a tough call. As Lad Tobin states about final grades,

I still struggle, even agonize, but I now know that it is not because I am an inexperienced, naïve, unskilled teacher; rather it is because grading is bound to be stressful and any grade is bound to be arbitrary to some extent. That does not liberate me to give up on the process altogether; instead the knowledge that there isn’t a single inherently fair grade for each text and student (a grade I never feel confident that I’ve discovered) frees me to do my best knowing that in the end, it is all I can do.57

Here, here, Mr. Tobin. Regardless of what the issue is in class, grades are difficult—and those excuses that undoubtedly accompany some of them make the final outcome even more indeterminate. Yet we need to trust our own instincts and experience with our classes, and know that the decisions we ultimately come to are based upon the work we have been given, the effort the students put forth, and all of the other factors that go into making that student a part of the class—or, in disappointing cases, not a part of the class.
No matter how inexperienced we might be or feel, we essentially are experienced with *that particular class*. So trusting ourselves to make the fairest decision for our classes’ grades is the first step, as Tobin proposes, to freeing ourselves, and knowing that our best is all we can do.
Conclusion

Shielding my eyes from the bright June sun because I, of course, forgot my tortoiseshell Audrey Hepburn-esque sunglasses, I trudge up the hill through the faculty parking lot, my flip flops slapping the pavement with each accelerated heartbeat. Wow, this hill. The bane of the existence of every student and faculty member at Western Kentucky University. Yet a good way to get some exercise, unwanted or no.

I finally make it to the statue of Henry Hardin Cherry protecting the entrance to my home for the last two years, the English department in Cherry Hall. Slipping through the glass door and along the hushed halls, I make it to the door of the mailroom and turn the cool brass knob. Funny how I still feel a little thrill opening that door that is for faculty only, even though I currently look the part of a student in my flip flops, ratty high school basketball T-shirt and athletic shorts. I grab the mail out of my wooden cubicle, soon to be someone else’s when I leave this place, and notice a large white envelope along with the copies of my thesis chapters my committee chair responded to. As I leave the mailroom and turn back the way I came, I rip open the pristine envelope and reveal a piece of pink paper inside printed with my name and class numbers from the semester. Ahh. . . . the Student Input to Teaching Effectiveness (SITE) results. These are my grades, the ones my students gave me the day I had to leave the classroom and wait outside while someone else handed my students yellow #2 pencils and surveys asking how well I did that semester. I brace myself for the inevitable bad remarks and begin skimming. Very few “disagree” answers, no “strongly disagrees.” Not bad, not bad. Then I get to the pages where the students can comment if they choose. “Ms. Swanson really is a great instructor who is very knowledgeable about the material in class. She
has fun teaching and is always available for help when needed.” Wow. Wonder who said that one? I continue scanning the paper—a long list of comments, unusual for these type of surveys. Usually very few students make comments. I don’t spot a single bad comment from either class. Well, unless you count, “We would like to have extra credits”—whatever that means. I did offer extra credit in my class for trips to the Writing Center. The previous semester I had not received many comments, but they were all relatively nice. Yet the results still made me wonder why I had received all good comments. It seemed impossible. I had to have gotten on someone’s nerves.

Okay, so I’m not complaining that I got a host of excellent comments from my students my last semester as a graduate teaching assistant. It did make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. But what about the constructive criticism? Where did they think I went wrong? How did the class work and not work for them? I wanted answers on my teaching style, and they obviously were not going to come from my students. And the fact that the students had few to no negative impressions of the class, even though I spent a whole thesis writing about all the problems I thought I was having, shows that while we, as teachers, may think we are going all wrong and handling things badly and making ourselves look incompetent, the students do not usually see that. They look at the overall picture and say, “Hey, this class was all right. My teacher cared; we did some fun things; I turned in some essays and learned something about writing.” So I am not going to complain about that. I am, however, going to take with me the problems I think I encountered in the classroom and reflect upon them, work on them, and attempt to make them better next time.
One thing I am not going to be afraid to do in the future is talk to my colleagues about my classroom. I think many of us—especially first-time teachers, but even those with experience—are hesitant to talk about our worries because we do not want to seem incompetent. And that is certainly understandable. We have the urge to defend our teaching methods rather than admit that perhaps they are not working as envisioned, and we do not want to defend our choices to one another, essentially conceding defeat. Yet it is exactly our reluctance to talk that causes the problems to reoccur and/or us to continue feeling inexperienced, unprepared, or ineffectual.

I still believe in the ideas of a community of writers and attempting to make my classroom student-centered. But I acknowledge that there are problems with these pursuits. They do not always work as we want them to. Collaborative environments rarely take into account underlying or even overt competition between students. It is there. And so far, few people have been open enough about it to explore what that competition means; what we can do to utilize it to our advantage. I merely brushed the surface of competition in the composition classroom—so much more needs to be said. I challenge myself and other composition teachers to look at our classrooms and explore this subject more fully in research, practice and—above all—conversation.

The subjects of responding to student texts personally and with peer revision might seem to be conversations with too many voices involved already. However, when so many of us are still thinking of responding to student texts as work, and viewing peer review as something ineffective and mostly useless, I think there is still something to be added to these conversations. Our perceptions about these things must change, and in order for that to happen we have to voice our concerns, problems, and triumphs. Having
sympathy for the author of a text is another tactic that can help us to quit thinking of responding as work, but more as a writer helping another writer find his or her voice. Teaching our students the same sympathy could help them to overcome the competition they feel when peers read their work and use other students’ writing strengths to their advantage.

We need to be honest with ourselves and others about our classrooms and teaching practices. Everything cannot be a success story—and why should it? Our stories can help one another reflect on the problems, make the changes and connect in the relationships we have with those around us. It is by realizing that my relationships with my colleagues could aid in my teaching practices that my relationships with my students became stronger. And although I still, at times, feel young, inexperienced and underqualified, I believe that by showing my warts here and while speaking with others, I make myself and my teaching stronger. I realize that, at times, we all feel this way. So in bringing some of these issues in my own classroom and experience to the surface, I hope to solidify the possibility in my mind (and hopefully other teachers’ minds) that we need to explore these issues and find the best approaches for our students’ overall learning. It is the nature of being a teacher to think that the more we know, the more we need to learn. It is what makes us teachers—we constantly crave more knowledge, more understanding, more connections. My hope is that other first-time and even experienced instructors find some connection with the words on these pages, the events in my classroom, and the ideas and theories that I presented here of my own and other (more accomplished and experienced) writers and teachers. While we may not be perfect, and
may never be, we can continue to learn from one another’s wonderful, funny, horrendous, often embarrassing stories and find solace in the fact that not one of us is alone in this.
Notes


6 Fleming 131.


8 Dethier 13.

9 Dethier 14.

10 Payne 105.

11 bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (New York: Routledge, 1994) 137.

12 Payne 105.


17 Farrell 909.

18 Farrell 909.


20 Payne 102.

21 Tobin, Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Class, 81.
22 Payne 101.


24 Meeks et al. 204-05.

25 Tobin 89.

26 Qtd. in Tobin 90.

27 Tobin 90.


30 Paton 292.

31 Tobin 95.


36 Elbow 397.

37 Ede 149.


42 Williams 262.


45 Flynn 52.


48 Tobin, *Reading Student Writing*, 11.

49 Spooner 160.

50 Tom Wayman, “Did I Miss Anything?” *The Astonishing Weight of the Dead* (Vancouver: Polestar, 1994)

51 Glenn et. al. 160.

52 Qtd. in Dethier 73.

53 Dethier 73.


55 Nathan 121.

56 Alison Knoblaugh, “Minimum Requirements,” *What to Expect When You’re Expected to Teach*. 27.