Comp Quickreads

Try It Out vs. Get It Right

Encouraging Experiments

What can we do to place greater emphasis on "trying it out" and less emphasis on "getting it right"? Here are a few classroom practices to consider:

Trying On Perspectives—Encourage students to think outside their conventional patterns by forcing them to "try on" the viewpoint of others. Students might be required to take up positions opposed to their own argument, work specifically with other writers who have taken opposing positions, or re-read a text with a raised consciousness (about gender or class, for example, or about some key idea such as "justice" or "nation"). Such activities in sympathetic imagining also help develop a sense of audience.

Low-stakes writing—These assignments allow students to take risks without significant consequences. Students might be asked to produce quick-writes, journals, or even mini-essays to work through challenging ideas. Such writing might eventually be incorporated into a high-stakes assignment, but only after appropriate feedback.

Multiple Drafts—Instructor feedback on intermediate drafts enable students to take risks in earlier drafts and then adapt and adjust to feedback from the instructor or from peers. Of course, most experienced teachers of writing incorporate multiple drafts into each writing assignment. To encourage students to take risks, however, early drafts should be ungraded.

Believe it or not, we get mail, and last week's *Comp Quickread* brought more than the usual one or two notes from China. One reader offered a very important clarification that is worth quoting in full:

"One quibble—or maybe less a quibble than an extension of something you said: I think the problems created by students' trying to sound "academic," or just plain smart, by using big words, convoluted sentence structures, passive voice, etc., are definitely worth pointing out to students (not, of course, while you simultaneously smack them with a rolled up newspaper and yell "Bad! Bad student!"), as is offering them assistance in clarifying (and understanding) their meaning and finding alternatives other than "dumb it down a bit." At the same time, though, I think it's important for teachers to keep in mind that the *impulse* students display in attempting these sophisticated but ultimately unsuccessful structures and vocabulary choices is a good one, and hence ought not to be discouraged; quite the contrary. Certainly one of the implicit goals of academic writing is to "sound like the teacher" (if you will), but we can't really expect perfect success right off the starting block. Nothing ventured and all that. Writing teachers especially need to make room in their classes for students to experiment and take risks in their writing without endangering their GPAs."

This note raises many interesting points about the classroom spaces we create and about our roles as instructors. I think the most important point is the last one, that we, as writing teachers or as teachers in general, need to recognize that our students are experimenting with words, forms, ideas, perspectives, ways of seeing, ways of reading, and ways of knowing. They need spaces where they can take risks, fail, and try again, where they can try it out without worrying about getting it right. And before someone accuses me of dangerous coddling, the need for such encouraging spaces is acknowledged in early childhood education, studies of creativity in both the arts and the sciences, and literature on management and leadership.

If given the opportunity to take risks, students will try out different approaches and develop strategies to get it right. Their ability to get it right, though, is directly related to the complexity of the tasks we give them. At each moment of their development they are hopefully being challenged with new ideas, new perspectives, new ways of organizing and engaging with the world and those challenges are leaving traces in their writing. A first-year student whose writing has been concise and logical can produce a sprawling self-contradictory rant in response to a question about the ethics of downloading music. A third-year student whose writing has been a paragon of clarity and grace can produce a nearly incoherent paper on Immanuel Kant. Of course Kant himself produced many nearly incoherent papers on himself.

Creating classroom spaces that support experimentation, though, is an increasingly difficult proposition in the twenty-first century corporate university. The "get it right" forces are everywhere from the expectation that writing can be taught in a single course to the rush to measure everything the university does through learning outcomes. Perhaps we should be more concerned about creating the spaces that enable what J. S. Mill called each individual's "experiment of living."