



Teaching Writing

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You wake up to the sound of your 13-year-old daughter talking to the computer, musing over how to properly punctuate the last sentence in her short story. You stumble past her into the kitchen, stunned from a dream where you lost your train of thought while teaching class and the students started booing you; just then she looks up with a half-smirk, half-expectant smile. You can't tell if she can read your mind or if she wants something. Before you cast away the last wisps of your nightmare, she wonders and exclaims, "Dad, please look this over sometime later today?!"

You nod, then shave and shower, grab a piece of toast and head to the office around 7:30 a.m. You arrive still clearing the sleep and dizziness out of your mind. You review your notes, your last minute ideas, your anecdotes, your students' names and their needs. You've culled principles from journals, books, websites, observations, and experiences. You consider your transitions, pacing, humor, and questions. You tell yourself synthesis and nuance must undergird today's classroom moment. You think about integrity, how if you're not penning your own pieces you can't teach writing with necessary moral authority.

You straighten your desk, check your tie, and tuck in your shirt. You kneel in prayer and give up your sense

of self, recognizing you will not be the only source of inspiration in the classroom, hoping you've done all to prepare so that when student inquiry and quizzical looks abound, you or another student or the Holy Ghost can provide a decent answer to the most random question you never would have considered.

You head down the hall, hear a few colleagues stammer, "Go get'em," "Leave'em wanting more." You remember those crazy high school football games when your teammates patted you on the back. After the cheers and war cries settle, you hunker down and quicken your pace for the classroom. You don't want to get there too early and you don't want to walk in late. The first entrance reveals your nervous laugh; the second makes you look careless and gives students a pass to send excuses up the aisles.

You arrive a little disheveled due to the wind and wipe away—real or not—any remaining toast crumbs sticking to your face. The eager students believe you're mulling over an important issue, something that may alter their educational experience. Some are still disconnecting from social media. Others are disguising that world. You write a quotation on the board, lay out the day's schedule, call on the most awake student to pray, and begin.

You learn fast not to bounce all over the room; you also learn you can't stay still for long. You come to understand when to look a student in the eye and when to address the whole group. You try to discern who needs praise and who needs reproof. You study kinesics, how some guy will put a hand on your shoulder as if to intimidate you or get chummy or how the kid from Eufaula, Oklahoma, won't get closer to you than ten feet away.

Together you brainstorm and draft. You take them into their past, asking them to confess their writing hang-ups. You exhort them to analyze their spelling and structural mistakes so they can see a better future. You model narration, classification, cause and effect, organization, parallelism, and thesis statements, providing examples from Shakespeare and Selzer to Dickinson and Didion. When the students become too dependent, you learn how to keep asking questions and how to hold yourself back.

You teach them the divide between revision and editing. You mention the former so much they understand that fixing a spelling mistake does not constitute earning a better grade. You help them re-see entire paragraphs,



you insist they thoughtfully develop their two-or-three-sentence ideas into an entire page, you have no trouble convincing them that raspberry cheesecake paints a better picture than dessert. This is not to say you downplay the differences between a colon and semicolon, nor does it mean that a misspelling won't matter on their résumés. You show them that their writing should be a finely crafted, intricately designed front door: a functional and beautiful entrance into their world.

You direct open-ended questions to individual students; you offer up other queries for the entire class. You wait. You remember the blessing of silence. You watch the students observe each other as they steer through writing waters, wondering who will stay above the waves and who will plummet into the deep. You circle back to a comment

mentioned ten minutes ago or to a question asked two weeks ago. Some questions you ask, and you don't reveal an answer.

Your students examine you—the kind of jacket you wear, the way one sideburn hangs a little lower than the other, your catch phrases, your method for wiping marker notations off the white board. One asks, “How long does this paper need to be?” Another pipes up, “Do you offer any extra credit?” A third whispers, “Can I speak with you after class?” They notice if you speak doubt or belief.

You're bombarded with a hundred names each day of the semester. You scrutinize faces and haircuts to find traces of distant relatives, middle school friends, high school dates, cherished teammates, and former acquaintances. You associate clothing styles and hair colors. You see trends and fads flourish, die, and recycle. You see hair that hasn't felt a shower in days. You scan faces that have watched too many movies on Netflix. You pay attention to permanent smiles and people you wish would smile once in a while. You hear your own name butchered, forgotten, prayed for, and elevated. You wonder what students call you behind your back.

Some days you read poems in class and the students look at you like you belong alone in the wilderness. They wonder why MLA or APA or any manner of citation even matters. Other days they humbly ask, “How can I improve my organization?” or, “How can I make this passage more descriptive?” or, “Why is my writing boring?” They want to know how you met your spouse, what happened at the birth of your first child, and if they're really audacious they'll ask you for your cell phone number or call your home late at night.

You feel the firm edge of honesty while grading and then passing back that first batch of papers. In this moment—or any moment, for that matter—your reputation and relationship with students can flail or skyrocket. You mentally toss around the word fair. You want your students to believe you embody this virtue, even when you know it's impossible to live up to it 100% of the time. You dart between justice and mercy, carry the weight of both—especially over a long weekend or Thanksgiving break. You think, “What comments will motivate Tyson to pull up his grade?” “What suggestions will help Megan re-work her conclusion?” You yearn for fresh turns of phrases and

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ideas; you prod yourself into new ways of spinning stock clichés so you'll stop feeling guilty for writing the same sentiment on too many essays. You pray to know whom to help and whom to leave alone. You pray not to overreact when a student asks, "Did I miss anything important last Friday?"

You see how students' thinking changes, slowly, almost imperceptibly. You encourage them to grapple after the right words and comb through a paper's mechanics. You challenge them to re-read texts; to re-examine an argument's assumptions; to re-think their relationships, biases, and politics. You watch them ping pong between fear and sympathy as they practice dialectical thinking. You cheer for them in their experiments with sensory and figurative language. You brace them when they write about being raised in foster homes or returning home from deployment to Kandahar. They leave class stronger, perhaps a little bewildered. Some process and remain unfazed in the face of ambiguity and immense writing choices. Others leave it all behind until they come back to the classroom two days later.

You witness the majority shuffle off to their next classes, to the next phase of their lives. Some stick around to ask about office hours or due dates. Some want to know what books to read and how you found your way to teaching. Some send a thank you note on a blustery day near the end of March. Some want you to write their research papers for them.

You admit your memory and organizational skills flicker and that you can't look like a student forever. After class, you walk to the library just to get some fresh air and eavesdrop on a little campus chatter. You notice the manicured trees and newly aerated lawns. If you're lucky,

about late April, you hear a few birds singing to each other. You watch the squirrels scurry away from trash cans. You see a student you thought you taught over six years ago. You gesture in passing, dig deep for a name, debate over the one you've found, and then give it up, settling for a simple smile.

Some look away when you see them ambling across campus, secretly hoping you'll say hi or stay a mile away. Some yell your name across the quad. They make you wonder if an accident happened. You stop and speak with them about their lives, fears, loves, stories, families. You feel trapped by the pull of time and routine. You need to get to Rigby Lounge for a faculty meeting, but something nudges you to ask Janice what didn't make sense last class period, to probe Michael about the introduction on his final essay. You remind them to drop by your office if they have additional questions. You wave goodbye, feeling more confident about your ability to build trust yet still wonder if you've done too little or too much.

You open your office door, inhale deeply, and think of your daughter and her story. You can hear her voice in your head, how she worked on her piece for eight hours, how she feels she needs just a few more suggestions to improve it. You gape at the stack of papers on your desk. You think about conferencing with students the next time around. You look up at the university's mission statement on your wall, "Am I building testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ?" "Am I providing a quality academic experience for students from a variety of backgrounds?" The thoughts swirl, linger, and run. You plan to address both queries in greater detail at a later time; nonetheless, they keep urging you, pressing in on you as you start again to evaluate essays and prepare for your next class. Amid these stirrings and nudgings, you're grateful to serve at Brigham Young University–Idaho, and you keep readying yourself, ever hoping and laboring for the next line of revelation to come. ❖