

Teaching At OCC—Suggestions for New Faculty: Peggy Langhans, English

Like writing, teaching requires that you find your own voice, out of the deepest part of who you are. You can listen to what others say about their techniques and philosophies, but you'll be merely mimicking another until you explore the particular passion that lured you into the classroom. Such passion, I think, helps you discover what your gifts as a teacher may be. It's not insignificant that teachers are called professors. As the word implies, we espouse a faith, and though there is certainly no orthodoxy in this faith, nor should there be, we each must find what it is that we are willing to stand for. For make no mistake about it: teaching is not merely a job. It is a vocation, a path of meaning-making, not only for students but for you as well.

Know What Energizes You

I've discovered that it is essential I teach what I love or at least works that lead to philosophical and ethical mulling, that force us as a class to wrestle with perhaps unanswerable but essentially humane questions. I also realize that, while I dutifully use small groups for some class work, my real enthusiasm is for the entire class discussion. Just as I prefer a party with, say, eight people engaged in one conversation, as compared to a large cocktail party where there are lots of smaller conversations, I find myself much more effective in working with a full class conversation. I realize that current pedagogy favors the student-center classroom, tending to see that structured best around small groups, but I believe that a full class discussion can be equally student-centered with the proper preparation and insistence that each student be responsible for reading and thinking (through writing) before he or she comes to the class that day. Toward that end, I require that students in my literature courses –and increasingly in all my classes—come each day with a typed page of response to a question I've posed for that day's reading. In a sense, that primes the pump, and it also allows me to teach them how to read by suggesting paths into the territory. (I'll have more to say about this a little later.)

Learn to Listen

For me, a class discussion is like a jazz session, dependent on attention to the energy of the others in the room. True, I begin a discussion with a number of clearly focused questions in mind in addition to what the students themselves have already thought about, but I must be willing to listen carefully, so that the needs of the students and the energy of the discussion can move in new ways, still adhering or building on the main themes. Of course, for this approach one has to be comfortable with the non-linear, the open-ended. Again, this is why it is so essential as a teacher to know yourself, to know the gifts and limits of your powers, to search for the authentic way that you are called to teach.

The Vulnerability of Teaching

It is important to recognize that genuine teaching takes a great deal of personal courage. We must be willing to be vulnerable and open to the moment in a classroom. I don't mean we ought to use the classroom for therapy or for our own personal agendas, which I see as inappropriate, but we must not be so intent on ego-control that we are deaf to what a dynamic classroom discussion can lead to. Since the whole emphasis in the community college is on teaching and on getting to know students on an individual level, this requires, too, that we come out of hiding from behind an aloof professional mask. Some of the most important teaching will take place in your office. Our students thrive on getting to know us, and quite practically, we are the ones they depend upon for letters of recommendation into the four-year colleges and universities.

I recall a number of years ago a former student returning to OCC during her junior year at a prestigious liberal arts college. She wanted to buy some Orange Coast sweatshirts to counter what she saw as snobbism toward community colleges. As it turned out, she felt that the classes at Coast were actually more dynamic than those at her new school since most of the students there, having entered as highly touted freshmen, were afraid of revealing what they didn't know and the class discussions seemed to her cautious, as if students believed they had something to lose.

The Virtue of Beginner's Mind

As a new faculty member, don't be afraid to ask questions, to reveal that you are confused, or over-whelmed. There are benefits in being a newcomer, not the least of which is a certain freedom in not even thinking you have to know it all. Such newness keeps us flexible, open to surprise, free of rigid judgments, with a heart that responds to the passion and enthusiasm that probably led you into the profession to begin with. Toward retaining this Beginner's Mind, I've found it helpful to change textbooks and assignments quite often, to teach works that I haven't wrestled into domestication, to do something each semester that unsettles me, demanding that I stay new in the process.

Don't Be Too Hard On Yourself

Maybe it's because I've spent years in a literature classroom, but to me anything alive and meaningful grows out of the heart of paradox. This is surely true for teaching. On one hand, you have moments when you actually sense a growth in your own skills and in those of your students, even as you see each year more clearly the vastness of what you don't know. After all these years, I still feel the anxiety of each new semester, the fear that after a summer away I haven't a clue what one does in a classroom, and at the very same time the excitement that maybe this time I'll "get it right", and the realization that of course I won't.

The Solace of Humility

A number of years ago, when we were talking in class about the vastness of human ignorance, a student told me of something he'd read from Margaret Mead. She explained, by way of the image of a chalked-in circle drawn on a blackboard, that the circle represents what we know, and by our very awareness of what we know, we are aware of the limited edge around that knowledge and the space of non-knowing that surrounds that little circle. As we grow in knowledge, the size of the circle of knowledge grows, but so does the awareness of the area of non-knowing. This image helps me at times of despair over my own teaching, helps me remember the solace of humility. I use the word despair quite deliberately because there are many times as a teacher that I've felt despair, over the ways I've failed to reach enough of my students, over their lack of effort or passion for something that matters so much to me, over my own ego that wants to name myself as successful.

Remember What's Important

The materials differ from medium to medium, but as in any art, the risk taking, the vulnerability is always there, especially if you believe as I do that education is not so much about earning a living as about living a life. And not just a life, one's own life. Such talk may sound grandiose, but to be blind to the power at the heart of the classroom is truly a failure of vision. Each student who sits in our class has the potential for a tremendous unleashing of energy, a capacity to change the world in some way. This is, I think, what often shakes my nerve, or contributes to my waves of dissatisfaction-- over my own imperfect assignments, over my inability to teach well enough. Yet, when I feel swallowed, say, by the paperload, I've found that it sometimes helps to set completely aside the pile of papers, and place one single student's essay on my desk, so that I can give it one-pointed attention, reminding myself of the sweet particularity of this one person. Such a shift gets the focus on what is important—the humanity of our students and the reason we're probably in the classroom to begin with.

The Courage to Teach

For someone starting out in the profession, as well as for those who have been at it for years, I recommend a wonderful book that speaks to the issue of courage and vulnerability—Parker Palmer's [The Courage to Teach](#), which so clearly expresses the truth about the significance of the classroom and of humane and passionate teaching. I've recommended it to my own students who were considering entering the profession, and to a person, they've found it inspiring. In fact, I think that it is important to face the reality that inspiration is essential to authentic teaching because, as the word itself suggests, it is about breath, about life, about that which quickens the soul. This is why teaching is essentially creative, an art as much as a craft. A craft can be mastered through learning to handle a particular technique, by skilled understanding of materials and their qualities, by having mentors demonstrate how to work with the tools, the theories, the concepts, but the art of teaching comes out of the dark, loamy and mysterious places of

your own soul. This is why it is truly a “calling”, not a mere job, not something you simply “do” to earn a salary, but the very path which leads you to your own particularity. If you can’t be passionate about your life’s work, why do it..

Our OCC Students

Some of the best students you’ll have are those who are starting their lives over again. In this sense I’ve often been struck with the very Americanness of the place, the variety of ages and background, the God’s plenty of humanity. People who may have drifted through high school and early adulthood, sometimes in a haze of adolescence or more serious problems, find that here is a place they can indeed reinvent themselves. People from cultures which didn’t encourage such folks to go on to higher education, middle-aged women returning after raising children-- you probably know the variety. Such variety, such new beginnings help to remind me that teaching is itself about re-inventing, re-seeing, re-writing. I’ve often thought it must be dreary to work at something that isn’t continually beginning anew. Just as I used to thrill to the new pencil-case and lunchbox I’d get each September in grammar school, I find I delight again in the new roll-sheet, the lists of richly varied names, the freshly printed syllabus, the potentially of it all.

Don’t throw them out of the rowboat and expect them to swim.

While you will find students in your classes who are equal to any you’ll find at a university, you’ll also find that most students need to be given specific ways of preparing for a project or a class. I can’t stand it when people come to class unprepared, having-- if at all-- merely read the material in a glancing way. I’ve given little reading quizzes at the beginning of the class, I’ve had them write to a prompt in class, but as I’ve mentioned early, what I’ve found most conducive to a focused and energetic class discussion is to have them come to class with something already written—typed (so they aren’t doing it at the last moment)—a one page response to a question that they find on the syllabus for that particular day. This forces me to build my syllabus around the questions, with the hope that the questions themselves address continually deepening thinking skills.

Let me illustrate this with an example from my American Literature class. Since we’re going to begin this Fall with Wharton’s **Age of Innocence** and end with Bharati Mukherjee’s **The Middleman and Other Stories**, I want the students to consider the shifting attitudes toward class and power as manifest through the changes in narrative voice. Thus, the first prompt of the semester will be “Select and comment upon at least three passages where the narrator’s witticisms about Old New York society reveal attitudes about class and status.” Here I’m offering a map for them to follow, one of many that could be sketched, so that they aren’t wandering vaguely through the novel. Then, by the time we get to the end of the semester, after Faulkner and Morrison and Roth, et al., they will have been nudged to levels of sophistication —oh, how I hope— about the shifting notions of narrative voice in the 20th century and the political and social

implications of that in terms of American society. It isn't that every prompt and question will necessarily focus on that identical theme, and I do allow for some freely focused responses, but I usually set up three or four key themes or ideas that will be the guidewires across the chasm of the semester.

For wonderful help along these lines, I recommend that you ask Lesley Danziger for a copy of her excellent article on teaching students in all disciplines to read more effectively, the subject of a very successful workshop she gave a few semesters ago.

Give Them Steps Into an Assignment

We've all been in classes where the game was to guess what the teacher had in mind, where as students we were given no clue as to how an assignment would be evaluated. To counter such mystery-making, it's helpful to give a rubric or a checklist for each writing assignment as soon as the assignment is given. This way students will know exactly what skills you are expecting them to master, and it keeps you honest, insisting that you actually teach those skills, not merely judge students for not having acquired them. I've found, too, that the checklist can serve as the guide for peer evaluations in early drafts of the essay.

Below is a very basic checklist/peer sheet that can be used for any early essay. (Notice that the emphasis at this point is not on editing issues but on global ones.)

1. Is there a clearly stated thesis, one that takes a stand on a question at issue? Does it do more than state the obvious? Does it have a slant, a controlling idea?

(Is there a sentence near the end of the paper that states the thesis even more clearly than the apparent thesis sentence? If so, identify it.)

2. Does each body paragraph in the essay have a topic sentence that develops some aspect of the thesis?

3. Is there an apparent sense of organization to the essay? Can you identify what it is?

4. Are there transitional words and phrases that move the reader from one point to the next?

5. Is there textual evidence in each of the body paragraphs? Direct quotes, paraphrases of specific evidence to support the claim or topic sentence?

6. Is there a frame (an orienting phrase or sentence) before each direct quotation?

7. Does the writer comment on the evidence, showing us how to understand the significance of the quote or example?

Close Reading

Since I think that close-reading of a text, in any discipline, is a skill few students have when they come to Coast, I usually spend time, perhaps in a second or third assignment, having them explicate a passage of text, leading them to consider the choices that the author made and the implications of such choices as they examine the specifics of diction, punctuation, imagery and tone. (For anyone interested, I have a handout on Explication that I'll happily share.)

Summary Skills

Another skill that I find students need help with is in getting to the heart of a reading, summarizing. Toward this end, I have an assignment on the 25-word précis, the very particularity of which forces students to be aware of the choices they must make if they are to work within the rigidity of an exact word count. I tell them how Robert Frost felt that writing free verse was like playing tennis without the net and that sometimes the very restrictions on the "game" are what help us to dazzling discovery. I include here my handout on the 25-word précis since I think it could be helpful even for classes outside the English curriculum. I find it also a way to insist on student writing without adding yet another full-sized essay to the weary teacher's homework pile.

While I no longer remember the name of the woman who, years ago at an English conference, suggested the idea of the limited précis, I do recall that she called it "an elegant solution."

The Twenty-five Word Précis

The word “précis” (pronounced pray-see) is French in origin and it means a brief, precise summary. In a précis, you include the name of the author and the work, but those words don’t count toward the 25 word total.

The writing of précis has a number of advantages for a writer-in-training:

1. It gives you practice in getting to the heart of a reading.
2. It helps you develop your evaluative skills. At first you may find you are merely summarizing the plot of a work(say, a short story), but as you get more sophisticated in the précis, you’ll find you’re able to focus on the theme, the essential meaning of the work, not simply on a literal paraphrasing of the plot.
3. It can sharpen your vocabulary. Since you are limited to exactly 25 words, you’re forced to be much more exact in your choice of each word. You’ll find, for example, that in summarizing an essay or non-fiction piece, there are many synonyms for “says.” Instead of writing “Smith says,” you may find that a simple change such as “Smith suggests” or “Smith insists” or “Smith argues” conveys important nuances that reveal the writer’s intention in the piece.
4. It prompts you to try working with more sophisticated sentence structure, such as parallel forms and subordination, which can add force and emphasis to the point you wish to make. (We’ll be discussing this more fully in class.)
5. It trains you to avoid wordiness. Every word must count. Filler words such as “very” or padded puffery shows up much more easily in the précis. The object isn’t merely to settle on 25 words, especially if 4 or 5 of those are simply filling space. Every word should add a significant piece of information to the summary.

Here are two examples of précis for the same story as seen by two different students:

1. Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” critiques the dangers of unexamined traditions. Although a few protest, most rural villagers willingly participate in an annual human sacrifice without understanding its primitive origins.
2. In “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson’s pleasant rural setting highlights the irony of a village’s traditional annual lottery; the winner is sacrificed in an ancient ritual to ensure bountiful harvests.

Notice that in #2, even the word “In” must be counted because it isn’t part of the title or author’s name. Notice, too, that the précis must be written in syntactically correct English sentences. It can’t sound like a telegram.

