Reflective Teaching Portfolio

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1. Define your teaching philosophy.

Like many of the faculty I've spoken with at FIT, teaching is a second career for me. I spent the first 20 or so years of my working life as a book editor in several major publishing houses. Among the things I learned from working with hundreds of authors on their manuscripts is that everyone, even authors with several published books to their credit, gets anxious about writing—at least writing that is judged.

I teach mostly freshman the craft of essay writing at FIT, and I feel my first job is to get them to relax. Because so many of them have learned to equate writing with fear and agony, I begin every other class session with a 10-minute free write. I never ask them to turn these free writes in, nor do I ask them to share what they write with the class. That would undermine the point of the exercise, which is to have them write regularly in a safe space, free of judgment. Free writes help them to get the day's anxieties (and they all have anxieties!) out of their heads and onto the page, where they can't do any harm. It also helps them get "normal" about writing—matter of fact, as if they were brushing their teeth. The students seem to look forward to the free writes; the classroom feels calmer when we begin the day's work.

Another big part of my teaching philosophy is to present things in practical, real life terms. For instance, if we are discussing persuasive essays, we talk about how the skills used in writing those essays mirror almost exactly the work they will likely soon do in a company. First they have to make clear what they are proposing to bosses and colleagues, whether an acquisition, a favorite project, or a marketing plan (the thesis), and then they provide support for that proposal with factual, anecdotal, logical, even emotional evidence. When we are talking about grammar and sentence mechanics, I don't use disembodied examples from online sites and grammar books. I take real life examples from their own papers to show how things can "go wrong" if they're not careful.

Lastly, I am aware of my audience, their interests and needs. One of the pleasures of teaching at FIT is working with visually oriented students. I try to present writing techniques using a

wide variety of mediums, including graphic novels and memoirs, photographs, paintings, video, and even sentence diagramming (a *visual* map of a sentence). I also try to get students "out of the classroom and into the world," as I like to say, to a museum or art gallery or antique store at least once a semester.

2. Have you ever observed a master teacher? If the answer is yes, what do you recall most from the experience?

I once took a graduate class with Dr. David Kennedy in Critical Thinking at Montclair State University, a school known for its Masters in Education Program. It involved a lot of high level reading and responding to that reading in "journals" which were really like mini essays. There wasn't a whole lot of guidance regarding what to write or focus on; I recall it feeling like "thinking on the page." This approach felt very grown up, very freeing. The professor was also a big proponent of "inquiry based learning," so almost every subject we discussed was framed as questions, rather than explanations, raised by the material. This took some getting used to, but it was thought provoking in a way I had never experienced before. Professor Kennedy also gave students enormous latitude and control over the class, asking students to teach the class to themselves when he had to be out for emergency surgery.

Of course, this was a graduate level class, and I teach undergraduate students at FIT. What I took from this example, though, is not to be so eager to spoon feed answers to students, even remedial or struggling students. They usually want, and need, to find out answers for themselves through their own research and experience and thinking. Often, the best thing we can do is help them form the questions that are worth figuring out, and then put them on the case.

3. Give an example of your most successful lesson. Why do you feel it was successful?

I love to teach a piece by the poet and journalist Walt Whitman from his journal *Specimen Days*. He wrote it while living in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. He describes how he watches the president, Abraham Lincoln, process down Vermont Avenue almost every day, detailing his modest dress and entourage, his interactions with family members and soldiers, and especially his intelligent, mysterious, deeply melancholy facial expression. We talk about how the president has been presented in the piece and what it says about Whitman's feelings toward him. Then we look at several iconic photographs of Lincoln by Matthew Brady, another great artist, both before he was elected and days before his assassination. I ask students who they think did a better job capturing the essence of Lincoln and all his complications—the photographic portrait by Brady or the word portrait by Whitman? Every single student gets an opportunity to speak. Their answers are all different, all thoughtful and heartfelt.

I think this lesson works because students are stimulated by intersecting mediums, especially if they involve great art. The juxtaposition of image and text and how they each achieve their

ends is an inquiry the students seem invested in. Though most of them are not familiar with either Whitman or Brady, they have a sense they are witnessing greatness, especially since the subject these two artists share is one as compelling as Lincoln.

4. Do you have an example of an unsuccessful lesson? How did you address the challenges?

I can think of several. But the one I remember best was during my first year of teaching. I needed to have students practice fixing their run-on sentences, the most common error in college essay writing. I Xeroxed a series of grammar exercises from a book designed to drill students in that task and distributed it in class. The sentences included ones about forest clearing in the northwest and the reasons for traffic congestion in LA. By the fourth sentence, everyone in the room was falling asleep, including me. I realized it was a mistake to use sentences that students felt absolutely no connection with, even if we were just talking about the use of periods and semi-colons. From that point on, I have used mainly grammar examples from students' own papers or ones that are related to content we are discussing during the semester. I have also discovered some very effective online tools for practicing mechanics that are customizable, so students can increase the level of difficulty for themselves even if others in the class are not ready. This, too, reduces tedium and delivers differentiated instruction to each student.

5. Why are you introducing and/or expanding the use of technology into your teaching?

I suppose I want to expand my use of technology in my teaching to have a broader range of tools with which to reach students. Teachers need to remain stimulated in their work as well as students, so incorporating new methods of delivering text and images, as well as spurring student interaction and collaboration, makes sense for everyone involved.

6. How do you feel these technology innovations will affect the student experience? How do you think it will it will affect your experience?

I want to make clear that I am not in favor of a wholesale reliance on technology in the classroom. I am, in fact, dismayed when a student who is staring at his phone during class assures me he is reading the novel or graphic memoir I have assigned on its tiny screen. This past year I have said no when students ask me if they can bring in laptops to take notes (I used to say yes). In my experience, both as a graduate student and a professor, students who have their laptops open during lecture periods (as opposed to computer lab classes, where their use is encouraged) perform less well than those who don't, not better. This is borne out by several studies I have read on student engagement in the classroom. (Please see

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Sometimes technology offers more distraction than opportunity.

I have also noticed, however, that every time I introduce a new medium for discussing, say, persuasion or argument, such as a TED talk or an interactive documentary from *The New York Times*, or offered students a self-paced online tool for diagramming sentences, they do seem to brighten up and become more engaged. I guess this isn't surprising; everyone is stimulated by new methods of approach. I would like to explore more opportunities for student collaboration with VoiceThread and Google docs, and give them more control and independence in what images and other mediums they want to explore writing and critical thinking through.

When my students become more engaged, I become more engaged and responsive, too. I enjoy finding and implementing new methods to approach writing and analyzing texts and images. This process of constantly refreshing methods in light of new technologies also leads me to consider materials for study that I had not tapped before. This helps me enjoy my job more. If I can help my department save money on Xeroxing and preserve some tiny portion of rainforest in the process, that's something to feel good about as well.

7. **Please describe new teaching ideas you plan to implement as a result of this technology certificate program.**

Because of the tools I've discovered recently while designing an online course, I have already begun to incorporate Blackboard items such as journals and online tests into my face-to-face courses. BB journals have given me a method of assessing how thoroughly students have read assigned material and prepared for the day's discussion. Journal entries on the reading are due at any time up to the beginning of class. Suddenly, more students than the usual four or five are completing the reading and participating in classroom discussions. Online testing has saved me the trouble of marking (not to mention Xeroxing) at least multiple choice and short answer assessments. (If only the essays could grade themselves!) This current semester is the first one in which all of my online and face-to-face courses are fully set up in Gradebook, so students can monitor their progress and current grades. I look forward to using the new BB tool for taking attendance next semester.

In my classes I like to use fiction and nonfiction texts that have some relevant historical context, and I feel VoiceThread could be very helpful in deepening our understanding of these works. In coming semesters, I plan to have students create visual and audio timelines on VoiceThread of the political and social upheaval in Iran during the late 70s and early 80s, the backdrop for the graphic memoir *Persepolis*. I am developing ways to broaden our discussion of Lincoln, Whitman, and Brady described earlier through sharing of research on the Civil War era, including biographical information about Lincoln and Whitman, who were contemporaries and spiritual soulmates. I would like to create a project for students to follow up on our museum visits; they can share photos they take at the exhibition and critique

various elements of the experience, from the layout and direction of the tour, to the effectiveness of the descriptive labels, to the quality of the art itself.

8. How will these new technology tools/approaches contribute to your classroom practice?

I believe the use of these tools and approaches will enhance the independence level of the students, leading them to take more direct responsibility for their own research and learning. I think it will also make our classroom time more innovative, stimulating, and fun.

I have found it surprising over the years that the young people we teach are not as uniformly savvy in their use of technology as I would expect; I believe exposure to these new tools will increase the comfort level of both the students and myself for experimenting with new technologies in the classroom. This spirit of experimentation —"Let's try it!"— will, in turn, enhance their skills and prepare them for technological challenges they will face in the workplace when they leave FIT.

9. How will you evaluate the success of your activities?

At least once a semester, I ask students for feedback on how specific elements of the course are helping them succeed with our desired learning outcomes. The surveys are always anonymous and allow them to add comments that are not specifically addressed in my questions. I find the information I get from these surveys enormously helpful and sometimes surprising.

I've learned, for instance, that students don't mind quizzes, though online quizzes make them a little anxious, especially if they are timed. They like looking at poems in the classroom, but they are extremely self-conscious about their lack of training in reading and analyzing them. They feel most poems they have read at school do not speak to them and their experiences. They love using non-traditional literature, including graphic novels and memoirs, as long as they respect the artist's skill. They like a break from text; visuals and mixing mediums stimulate them. They're okay discussing material and doing research in groups, but they like to have their writing assessed and commented upon individually. They enjoy spending a few minutes at the beginning of class doing free writes, or unjudged writing. Though there are patterns, not all of the classes respond the same way semester to semester; I've found I am able to adjust to the feedback I get from each class and improve my methods for reaching them.

End of semester evaluations, of course, are also helpful, but they are less valuable to me in assessing the success of specific tools I use in the classroom.

Often, the proof for me that a teaching method or tool is working is in the pudding: in my case, their writing. One reason I've wanted to increase and enhance my use of technology is that I see greater improvement in students' essays, and in the quality and extent of our

discussions, when I harness a variety of mediums and tools to present content. Becoming proficient in Blackboard and teaching a course online has been enormously helpful in this regard.

10. What do you consider to be the bigger picture items with regard to technology and learning?

I think one of the biggest issues we need to wrestle with when introducing more and more sophisticated technology into the classroom (online or face-to-face) is access and training. I have seen wide variation in the skill level of students in the same modestly sized class, with some students who are not sure how to use Spellcheck sitting beside students who could practically be programmers.

The variation is even more pronounced in my online course. Last semester, for instance, I called up an online student who was skipping assignments and struggling in general. She told me that because her family situation was in flux, she did not have access to a home computer. She was trying to complete the tasks of the course, including writing formal essays, on her phone. I tried to persuade her that this was not a good idea and that there were computers in many locations on campus for student use. She eventually dropped the course.

I feel that FIT does a tremendous job training its faculty in using new technologies such as Blackboard, Google docs, Lynda.com, and VoiceThread. However, I feel our focus needs to shift a bit to student training in those same areas, especially for online courses. Statistically, we know that students achieve lower grades in online courses. In my personal experience, too, more of my students drop or fail my online course, and the material is no more difficult than in my face-to-face class. Although the reasons for this are probably complex, comfort with and training in technology must be a factor. Yes, we have a SUNY helpdesk, and they are reminded of this constantly, but for some reason many students are reluctant to ask for help in that way.

Just as the school requires all faculty to obtain hours of training before teaching online, I believe all students signing up for online courses should be required to take at least a brief workshop in using basic BB tools—discussion forums, journals, tests, email, and submitting papers—to increase their odds for success. I would also hope we could offer all students occasional workshops in VoiceThread and other, more sophisticated tools we all agree would enhance their learning.