Paul Riker

Teaching Philosophy (Revision)

Matt Bell, a writer and educator, tweeted the following about his own teaching pedagogy:

I think about these tweets a lot, in light of my own teaching; I also think about them a lot in terms of the way that, in many (although not all!) of my English classes growing up, I was "taught" English in precisely the way that Bell describes. The incentive for the student was to *not* be punished; the incentive was to do the work assigned because the teacher/professor/instructor/whoever said so. And, often, this work was not, as Bell notes, "meaningful" – it was delivered through comprehension quizzes, grammar checks, and/or recitations about what something in a text "symbolized" or "meant." In other words, they were things that could be graded; they were either completely right, or they were completely wrong.

To be fair, "Writing" is a "class," in the same way that Trigonometry, Chemistry, or Physics is a class; in any class, there are questions, and those questions necessitate answers. Because so much of mathematics, science, etc. education is (not always rightfully!) based in memorization and solving discreet problems, it is easy to assume that Writing – or "English" in general – can, should, and perhaps must be taught in this same way.

Writing, however, is different from these disciplines in that, more so than any of them, it is, fundamentally, a creative art: it is an act that is ultimately an expression of the writer, an act that is imbued with the voice, the thoughts, the feelings, and the wants and fears and loves and hates of that writer. This is probably the creative writer in me coming through: I primarily write fiction, and, when I write, these considerations are always in the back of my mind; i.e., the thing I am doing is "greater" than just a mechanical action: it is a "fine art" in the highest sense, and it requires a certain level of creativity and vulnerability in order to engage at a deep and meaningful level.

As flowery as it may seem (and I recognize that it is, like, pretty damn flowery), there is no reason why this same thinking cannot be applied to *any* writing class – whether Introduction to Fiction, Advanced Composition, or even an Introductory Composition course targeted at incoming undergraduates (as I have taught during my graduate studies at Purdue University). I've had many students tell me, sometimes in plain language, that they "are not" writers, or that they are "not good" at writing. To which I ask: what exactly does that mean? How can you be "good" at an art – an art whose value is determined entirely subjectively? Am I good at writing? Is John Milton good at writing? We learn that "yes," he was – but what if you don't like Milton? Is he "good" at writing, then?

I pose that these students' reflections on them being "bad" writers come from precisely the kind of rote English pedagogy that I noted above, and that Bell describes in his tweets: a pedagogy that teaches English as a set of rules. A pedagogy where there is a "right" way to write. Where writing is something to be solved.

My teaching philosophy is centered on "Creative Writing." I don't (necessarily) mean writing a story, a poem, or a narrative essay – although, I guess, I *could* mean those things. Rather, I have aimed, in all of the courses I have taught, to emphasize the artistry and exploratory nature of Writing (capital-W) as a discipline. What are the things we can do through Writing that allow us to think critically about our surroundings? How can we use Writing as a means to find, express, or create joy? What can we learn about *ourselves* through Writing, and how does the act of writing – writing *anything* – let us dig into those possible learnings?

Every student who takes a composition course *will* write in their future – whether it's a PhD dissertation or emails to coworkers – so the claim that *any* student is not "a writer" is inherently false. Writing pedagogy, then, should focus on the implicit learnings possible from such courses, rather than how "right" a student can "get" a given assignment. For example: the goal of a research essay should not be "does the student know how to cite sources in APA?" (because, really, that doesn't matter). Instead, it should be "does the student know how to synthesize complex information and express that information in their own voice, through the angle of their own writing and experiences?" If writing a narrative essay, the student should not be graded on how well they stick to a pre-defined structure, but rather how well their own narrative is communicated through their own personal, stylistic choices as a writer. Everything that students do in a writing course – and every word that they write – should be considered in

the context of that student; they are "succeeding" simply by putting words down on the page. And perhaps – perhaps! – that is enough.

So, then, the writing classroom must be an exploratory, creative, and lively space. It's fun! It's full of humor! My teaching style is very casual – I reference memes; I curse; I've taught rhetorical concepts through *Space Jam*, *The Simpsons*, and *Seinfeld* – and it is casual with intention: if the classroom space is not hierarchical or disciplined, it allows students to relax, to let whatever creative inhibitions they may have flow more freely. If they're having fun, if they are relaxed and not constantly scrutinizing whether something they are creating is "good," they'll implicitly think more critically, ask questions, and strive to find deeper meanings – because there's no penalty for failing. Everything is simply trying.

I'd like to think that this is the thesis of Bell's tweets. The "all carrot, no stick" is, in fact, a creative, safe, and "experimental" classroom. It is assignments that are valued by students, and an instructor that finds the brightness and creativity in any assignment, regardless of the assignment's explicit goals. It is creation – and, simply, it is creative creation.