

Teaching philosophy: intentions, approaches, practices - Charles (Gib) Prettyman

Early in my career at Penn State, the late Jack Royer gave a talk that continues to inform my teaching intentions and approaches. Royer said that we must remember to teach the students we have, not the students we wish we had. I think of this intention as compassionate engagement. He also said “If you are working harder in the classroom than your students are, something is wrong.” I call this the coaching model of education: our job is to help the students to acquire and practice skills that will make them more competitive in their chosen fields. When they face a crucial situation—writing an application letter for their dream job, persuading someone of their innovative idea, defending their ideals or insights—I want them to know what it takes to do an excellent job of reasoning and writing. Often as I walk to class I repeat these insights as a kind of mantra: “be compassionate and make them work.” Having this clear intentionality about teaching helps me to maintain rigorous standards, to be passionate about my subject matter, to be compassionate toward my students, and to allow them time and space to work.

In my experience, the most successful approach to teaching-as-coaching is flexibility. I prepare a wide array of specific activities, but the primary method is trial and error: try a reasonable activity; see if it works for them; if it doesn't, then try something else. I come to class with activities in mind, but I am ready to use the teachable moment or the unexpected development. I give students extensive feedback, but I also rely on their feedback to me.

Having this pragmatic approach leads me naturally to a variety of learning-focused classroom practices. In my writing classes, for example, I allow unlimited revisions to the major assignments. Students who use my feedback to improve their paper substantially can replace the original grade with the new grade. This practice requires more work on my part—sometimes considerably more. However, it also allows me to make all of my comments constructive ones, aimed at how the essay could be improved. In this way, the focus is not on failures, but on areas for improvement. Also, students who are willing to work can usually improve their grades—and more importantly, learn as much as possible in the course of a semester.

Similarly, I provide extensive written comments on papers. For each paper I provide marginal comments (now mostly by electronic means) and provide typed summary comments. I also provide a grading rubric for most assignments, with the appropriate descriptors highlighted for each student's paper. In general, I spend around 30 minutes per paper—and sometimes more—so that I can try everything possible to convey to the author the strengths and weaknesses of her draft. Using unlimited revisions and extensive personalized comments is designed to emphasize the writing process and to focus on revision as the key to improvement. In the spirit of coaching, I also encourage revision in other classes: learn, practice, get feedback, and repeat.

In terms of content, my writing courses emphasize the empowering nature of language use by building assignments around current news topics. Rather than using an over-priced textbook full of grammar advice and literary models, I use newspapers and the internet for class discussions and assignment topics. This emphasizes the direct relevance of rhetorical power, rather than associating language with obscure rules and old texts. In my experience, too many students assume that “English” is a highly specialized field that only English teachers care about. Similarly, my literature and culture classes emphasize the human uses of representations: stories, novels, television shows, movies, advertising, and so forth. I want students to experience how analysis of literary and cultural representations is relevant to their lives. In Honors classes, I encourage students to formulate research questions, consider research methods, and attempt original research. In all classes, then, I'm trying to translate the techniques and insights of humanities analysis into practices that are immediately relevant and useful to my students.