Transparent from the Start: Unpacking Assumptions in the Composition Class

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TRANSPARENT FROM THE START: UNPACKING ASSUMPTIONS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASS

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VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
CONTEXTS

• Democratization of American higher education
  • Sounds good, but how many graduate, and how long does it take?
• Influx of “new” students
  • First-generation students nationwide, and at VSU
• Challenges in the classroom, esp. 1st semester
  • Students in the “middle”
  • The disaffected
WHY TRANSPARENCY MATTERS

• To close gaps
  • Expectations
  • Acculturation

• Precondition of student engagement
  • “What do you want us to do?” (always voiced plaintively)

• Precondition of my engagement
  • Assignments, in-class work always in service of learning goals
  • If I can’t say “why” in one sentence, why are we doing it?
COX, COLLEGE FEAR FACTOR: PROBLEMS IN WRITING CLASSROOMS

• Student desire for professor to be authority: “stranglehold of professorial model on higher education” (111)
• Student desire for “informative information”
• Readings meant to generate ideas or model rhetorical approaches judged “irrelevant”
• Instrumental approach to education: “How does this help me?”
• Resistance to peer work (“I don’t want some stupid kid grading my paper”)
Cox, College Fear Factor: “Coming Down to Our Level”

Teachers in successful composition classes:

- Demonstrated expert knowledge
- Authority through interpersonal relations
- Rigorous content and standards:
  - Explicit expectations
  - Showed how to reach them
  - Encouraging
  - Respect for student abilities (willingness to be impressed)
- “Mutual relationship based on responsibility”
HOW DO YOU DO IT?

What tactics do you use in the classroom?

• How do you explain (or get students to understand) learning goals?
  • Assignments (tests)
  • In-class work
  • Homework
  • Grades
• What’s hardest to explain? When is it hardest to be transparent?
  • Why?
TRYING TO BE TRANSPARENT: GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS

Handout:

Sections 1 and 2: Trying to spell out college codes

Section 3: Trying to spell out differences in high school and college writing

Section 4: Trying to spell out my role
OTHER MATERIALS

Handouts on Technology:

• Welcome and explanations and demos for D2L tools

• Online info on word processing—tools and shortcuts

• Online demo of MLA formatting with links to video tutorials
FOLLOWING UP

Sample Early Online Notebook Entries

• What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student?
• What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

Sample Later Online Notebook Entries

• What’s the difference between successful and unsuccessful college students?
• What are you learning about yourself as a writer? What’s improving? What needs more attention?
• What can Gardner do better to help you learn?
CURRENT/FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Current

• Making student success explicit subject of ENGL1101 classes
  • Ken Bain, *What the Best College Students Do*
  • Documentaries of student success at VSU

• Future
  • Integrating Problem-Based Learning