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What do I do with my students for the 50/75 minutes of class time?

These strategies are entirely anecdotal—they are things I've used and refined in my 11 years of teaching freshman writing classes.

One Idea About How to Plan Class:

Step 1: Ask yourself “What do the students need to learn tomorrow?”

Step 2: Ask yourself “How can I get them to discover these things through writing, without me talking/lecturing?”

In my experiences, the most productive and successful classes are centered around students actively writing, sharing their writing, reading other student's writing, and discussing their writing with one another. This, in conjunction with a full-class sharing and facilitating by me, accounts for the full 75 minutes of class. The more active we make them, the more they will learn (because they're forced to discover, rather than be told); the more fun they have and the more pleasant the environment is, the less work you have to do, and the students take ownership of the learning, rather than sitting as empty receptacles waiting for you to impart wisdom. This also empowers them—if the students are active in the class then they already have a lot of the necessary knowledge to succeed in the course, and they only have to take the time to discover their knowledge.

In this way, the best class is one in which the instructor does the least amount of talking. It's true that the more I talk, the worse the class goes, the more their eyes glaze over, and they drift off into thinking about other things. We have to make them the active center of the class; *they generate the content*. As the instructor, you just get them started, and when they share full-class you refine or elaborate on their approaches.

If/when they resist the freewriting, I always reiterate that a.) it's a writing class so what did you expect, and b.) the in-class writing is practice, just like a sports team would repeatedly practice fundamentals every day, i.e. shooting 500 free-throws or running 100 laps, etc. This is our practice and our fundamental exercise.

How do they generate content? What are they writing about?

Whatever you want to say, get them to say it. Ask it as a specific freewriting prompt. Get them to discuss it amongst themselves.

The freewriting is then shared in full class or in pairs/groups. Then we come back to the full class and I write responses on the board, discussing how their answers pertain to a larger picture of what we're doing as we prepare for the essay, elaborating, refining, making connections to course concepts, etc.

I believe this student-centered or student-activated approach is the best way to engage them, to get them thinking about core concepts of the class, and practicing writing and critical reading. It forces them to be reflective and to take ownership of their role in the class.

Of course, the big hazard of the student-centered method is: what if the students are not active on their own?

I never try to intimidate a student or hold a grade over their heads. The key is to just keep reiterating your points and logic behind what you're doing. I often use humor and gently cajole; once the students get into this then they tend to thrive and rely on it, which is exactly what you want. You can also roam freely and join groups, which is an excellent way to teach on individual papers and also "check up" to make sure everyone is working.

Breakdown:

I always begin each class with an introductory "light" freewriting, usually 8 minutes, which we share as a full class. I have an enormous list of prompts; if anyone is interested just email me.

I then talk about where we are in any given assignment, and how the day's prompts will stimulate their thinking about the essay and generate text for the essay.

I write the prompts on the board, usually one, then writing, then another, then more writing.

Example 1: 9/17/2012 Preparing for Summary and Strong Response

FW 10 Public: What were your biggest fears about coming to college? Why? How many of them were unfounded? How many were legitimate? What *should* you have feared, if anything?

Brief aside from instruction: Freire: Pedagogist, Brazilian, died in 1997. As a pedogogist, he studied theories of educating and learning.

Freewriting prompts, sharing after each one, or at the end, in groups or in pairs.

What was your experience like reading the essay?

What is the point of his essay—why did he write it, what was he trying to convey?

What specific points of the essay reveal his point/thesis?

Does Freire suggest a solution?

If Freire is suggesting a problem—what is at stake? What does the problem represent on a more global or philosophical level?

Why does he keep talking about oppression, dehumanization, and liberation, especially in an essay about methods of teaching?

Full class discussion:

Summarizing, vs. responding.

Freire is making a pretty bold claim, at least in my mind—most people don't see a classroom set-up and think that it is dehumanizing and oppressing, that the power play is terribly significant.

What are ways to respond to his statements?

Personal/anecdotal.

Another way is to admit that you haven't ever considered it before, but it is worth thinking about.

You could also disagree and respond to his logic and say that he doesn't fully prove his point, or he is exaggerating, etc. But you need logic of your own to do refutation.

For homework, read the DFW essay and do a brief write-up, not for handing in, describing his thesis and locating the points in the essay where the thesis is evident. One way to respond is to assess whether or not this is an effective commencement address.

Example 2: Reflecting on their essays pop-quiz

FW 10: What are all the things we've gone over/learned that will help you write this paper?

Share in pairs, then full class.

In-Class Pop Quiz: Creating an outline from thin air

1. What is the product of the ad?
2. What is your thesis?
3. What are the images?
4. What do the images "mean" and how do you know?
5. What are the topic sentences of your paragraphs—if you don't have topic sentences, what should they be, what should they cover?
6. What is your synthesis? How do the ads work together to make an overall statement? How are they different and make individual statements?

P. 249—264 incredibly useful detailed explanations of structure and form

Full drafts due Monday. This is a requirement. I want everyone to have at least 5 pages in class, so that you can take the last week before it's due and fully revise it and refine it.

Example 3: Reflective Mid-term evaluation

- What is your goal with this class? What's your purpose?
- How will you achieve that goal? Are you doing what you need to do? Why or why not?
- When you think back over the class, which moments come to mind? Good moments? Bad moments? Perplexing? Describe the moments that stick out in your mind, and the emotions you feel/felt.
- What do these moments tell you about yourself as a student? What do they say about this course?
- What are you most proud of about your own effort or accomplishment in the course? What do you want to improve?
- What has been your greatest challenge in the class?
- Has this class changed the way you think about writing? Changed the way you write? Why, or why not?
- What's been most helpful? The least? What might be more helpful?
- Is this course a journey? Is it a setback or detour on a journey? Describe.

- Take out the course syllabus and find the sections on Attendance and Professionalism. What do those sections say about these topics, and how does your performance in class pertain or not pertain to these topics? Describe your class performance in detail, in regards to these two areas of the course.

Example 4: A regular day for me

11/7/12

FW 10 Public: If you were going to give advice to an incoming freshman at UH for January 2013, what kinds of things would you tell them?

Organize in groups of 4 and discuss the following things about “Bo.”

1. How is this a literacy narrative?
2. Locate and discuss the use of images in the essay.
3. Summarize the plot—can you create a timeline of beginning/middle/end?
4. Characterize the speaker—what do you know about Julie Wan?
5. This is a pretty short essay—what types of things were left out?
6. How can this essay be useful for you?

Full class: responses from groups

Full class: What did you think of this essay? Good? Bad? What worked? What didn't work?

10 FW: Does this essay give you ideas for your own essays? How many ideas are you currently kicking around? What advantages do your ideas contain? What disadvantages? How can you overcome the disadvantages?