

Teaching Writing That Matters

Tools and Projects That Motivate Adolescent Writers



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Cover design and illustration: Jorge Namerow

Interior design: LDL Designs

Acquiring editor: Gloria Pipkin

Production editor: Sarah Weaver

Copy editor: Carol Ghiglieri

ISBN-13: 978-0-545-05405-8

ISBN-10: 0-545-05405-2

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Printed in the U.S.A.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 23 12 11 10 09 08

Contents



Acknowledgments	v
Foreword	vii
Introduction	ix
PART I: Toward Writing Studies Classrooms	1
Chapter 1: The Joys (and Torments) of Teaching and Writing	3
Chapter 2: Testing Despair and Teaching Hope	13
PART II: Key Concepts for Teaching and Writing	25
Chapter 3: Reflection in Teaching and Writing	27
Chapter 4: Rhetorical Awareness in Teaching and Writing	39
Chapter 5: Community in Teaching and Writing	53
PART III: Toolboxes	65
Chapter 6: Project Toolbox 1: Writing With Experience	69
Chapter 7: Project Toolbox 2: Writing With Texts	83
Chapter 8: Project Toolbox 3: Writing With Research	99
Chapter 9: A Writer's Process Toolbox	119
Chapter 10: A Teacher's Toolbox	141
References	171
Index	175

Acknowledgments



We would like to thank the following people:

Our colleagues at SUNY–Albany, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and University of Minnesota, who have contributed so much to our thinking and to this book, especially Robert Brooke, Kris Cory, Amy Goodburn, Rochelle Harris, Debbie Minter, Steve North, Joy Ritchie, and Shari Stenberg.

Our students, who continue to teach us how to teach.

Our intrepid editor, Gloria Pipkin, who helped us see that our writing mattered.

Our other editor, Lois Bridges, who makes it happen.

Our families, who supported us through this almost-decade-long project: John, Molly, Cady, and Erin. We dedicate this book to them.

Foreword



Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.
—Voltaire

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.
—W. B. Yeats

There is a plague on Hogwarts School District, a darkness that has descended on the castle, not from the Death Eaters in Azkaban prison, or the devious lessons of Dark Arts teacher Severus Snape, or even the bodiless corpse of the very evil Lord Voldemort. No, this darkness came from a much more banal source: the alabaster buildings of Washington, D.C., where misguided muggle lawmakers along with a power-greedy secretive muggle administration created a law called No Child Left Behind to reform the American educational system. By calling the law No Child Left Behind, the lawmakers very cleverly created a paradigm where those against the law and its impositions on creative teaching, critical thinking, and student-teacher relationships might be seen as against the progress of underprivileged children.

In reality, what the law did was give millions of dollars to testing and workbook companies, eat up hours of valuable school time with meaningless tests, and retain thousands of innocent children under the totally unfounded precept that retention will help them to learn more without all the well-documented negative-self-esteem consequences. I am not going to say how the dark lords of Washington achieved their goal, except to point out that the commonsense values of teachers and school leaders were replaced with trumped-up scientific studies funded by the same corporations that benefited from their research by selling monolithic quick-fix programs. School leaders relinquished their leadership roles and bowed to the pressure of money, politics, and

the will of their superiors. There is a lack of understanding, a lack of will, a lack of hope, and a lack of courage.

Enter Harry Potter, not the brightest kid in the school, not the strongest either, and he wears spectacles to boot. But Harry has something that teachers and school leaders need more today than ever. He is creative, he is hopeful, he is kind, and he is just. But perhaps most important of all, he is *brave*.

Only a wizard like Harry Potter could have saved Hogwarts School from the darkness, and only courageous teachers with the qualities of Chris Gallagher and Amy Lee can save the American public school system from the terrible plague that NCLB has left hanging like a black shroud over our classrooms.

“This is a book of unabashed hope,” says the first sentence of this incredible book. Let me repeat that so you can drink in its medicinal meaning.

“This is a book of *unabashed* hope.”

Teaching Writing That Matters is a clarion call to all writing teachers everywhere to get back to real literacy instruction, back to what really will improve our schools and motivate adolescent writers. Written by two engaged, committed teachers, this important book analyzes what real writing is and shows key concepts, then demonstrates those concepts with real, practical examples of projects from middle and high school writing classrooms.

Reading this book will not only teach you how to teach meaningful writing, but also why we write and teach in the first place. Veteran and new teachers alike will be inspired by the ideas and attitude of the authors. It is a book that will be read and reworked by the teachers who use it. Like seeds, new ideas from this book will generate new writing curricula.

But though *Teaching Writing That Matters* is chock-full of practical ideas and great examples, it's not just a handbook or typical professional book. Its authors aim to inspire as much as teach. Let me repeat it one more time.

“This is a book of unabashed hope!”

Hope is that muggle ability to see past the clouds to the rainbow on the other side. Hope is the lightbulb feeling a new teacher gets at that moment when a lesson finally clicks with the students.

Hope is what turns teachers into wizards.

—*Barry Lane*

Introduction



This is a book of unabashed hope.

Not misty-eyed or head-in-the-sand hope. We're neither mystics nor prophets. We're teachers, and we come across our hope the same way most teachers do—honestly. Our teacher's hope is never unalloyed, always fragile. But without it, we would not, could not, be teachers. Our students feed on it.

For teachers today, reasons for hope sometimes seem scarce. Students often come to school alienated, disengaged, with other things on their minds (and usually with good reason, given the shape of their lives). People outside of schools, especially politicians and policymakers, exert enormous pressure on the daily life inside schools. Time, resources, and professional recognition are in short supply, even as expectations increase.

And yet here we come, peddling hope.

The source of hope we offer here goes under the unlikely name Writing Studies. Though it might sound a bit dour and academic, Writing Studies is a powerful and empowering idea. And it's an idea whose time has come.

At the college level, where we do most of our teaching, the old Freshman Comp course is being reimagined as Introduction to Writing Studies (Downs & Wardle, 2007). Instead of treating first-year writing as an all-purpose introduction to “academic discourse” or universal writing skills, college writing teachers are starting to treat it as sociologists treat Introduction to Sociology—as a course that is *about* its subject, writing. And in fact, recent collections of scholarly essays with names such as *Coming of Age* (Shamoon, Howard, Jamieson, & Schwegler, 2000), *A Field of Dreams* (O'Neill, Crow, & Burton, 2002), and *The Subject Is Writing* (Bishop & Strickland, 2006) announce that Writing Studies has arrived as a full-fledged field of study.

This development fills us, longtime writing evangelists, with hope. For many years, our work with fellow teachers has revolved around the idea that students at any level benefit from writing courses when they both study and practice writing—when it’s what they *learn about* and it’s what they *do*.

We first learned this lesson ourselves ten years ago, when we were teaching in a college writing program called the Writing Sequence at the State University of New York at Albany. Many teachers in the Sequence, as it was informally called, had taught traditional Freshman Comp courses with limited success. We had discovered that teaching “academic discourse”—the language and conventions of the university—was not preparing our students to write well when they left our classes because each discipline has its own language and conventions: there is no such thing as a single academic discourse. Also, as studies of intellectual “transfer” confirmed, our students were not able to transport generalized writing skills across different contexts but instead needed to build skills and familiarity within each “discourse community” they entered. It was clear to us then that the traditional Freshman Comp course, imagined as a preparatory or remedial course in generalized writing skills, was not working.

So what did we do? The almost unthinkable: we turned traditional composition inside out. Instead of treating writing as a general set of “user skills,” the Sequence conceived of writing as complex intellectual work, worthy of the kind of sustained study we devote to sociology or history or engineering. Instead of treating writing as merely the “vehicle” for students’ thinking about another subject, we understood it as both the means and the object of their work. In other words, students wrote in our classes, but they also *studied* writing. Instead of treating students as students who had to write, we treated them as *writers*: people who used writing for a variety of authentic purposes. Instead of pretending there are universal standards for “good writing,” we taught students that “good writing” is context-specific, always a matter of negotiating the particular conventions and expectations of the writing situation. And instead of teaching Freshman Comp as remedial, an attempt to “fix” student writers, we taught it as a stimulating investigation of the work of writing and the work writing does in the world.

We knew right away that we were onto something. Students gained competence and confidence not only in our courses, but in their other courses as well. We teachers, meanwhile, were invigorated by the Writing Studies classrooms we were able to create with our students. It was scary, but also liberating, to learn new ways of interacting with students and their writing. Our weekly teaching meetings, at which we shared teaching ideas and developed the curriculum, were full of anxious excitement. We wrote and talked, talked and wrote. Often, we shared artifacts from our classrooms—assignments, responses to students, examples of student work. Sometimes we brought students into our conversations. In short, we formed a teaching and learning community that sustained our individual and collective reflection on our teaching.

Because we knew we were onto something, we began writing about the Sequence. Papers spread everywhere, we sat on the floor of Amy’s apartment in Albany and began collecting our thoughts about what we and our students were experiencing. We had no idea what this project would become; we only knew we wanted to share our excitement with other teachers and their students.

Over the years, we continued to think, talk, and write about the Sequence, but a variety of other projects—many of them with our K–12 colleagues—claimed our attention as we settled into our respective homes in the Midwest.

Meanwhile, interestingly enough, the teaching of college writing was being transformed, moving toward Writing Studies.

We hope this book contributes to the development of Writing Studies. We are especially keen to share this approach with our middle school and high school teaching colleagues for two reasons. First, even if younger students are not able to conduct the kind of disciplinary inquiry that some Writing Studies proponents envision for college students,* the key tenets of Writing Studies are as appropriate for adolescents as they

* In fact, our own approach to teaching college writing differs in some respects from the model offered by Downs and Wardle. For instance, we do not rely as heavily as they do on empirical studies of writing, either in the reading we provide students or the research we ask them to conduct. Though we do introduce students to research on writing and ask them to study writing, what is most important to us is that they come to see themselves as *writers* participating in a variety of personally meaningful “discourse communities,” rather than *scholars* confined to the discourse community of Writing Studies itself.