



## Talking the Talk, but Not Walking the Walk: A Meditation on Irony

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I came to teaching late by most standards, returning to college in my mid-30s and starting my first teaching job in my early 40s. Still, six years of teaching composition in a public two-year college feels a bit like dog years, a condensed and hyper-accelerated version of “ordinary” experience. This kind of teaching is not for sissies or weaklings; it’s the ultimate Darwinian test of endurance and adaptation. There’s no feeling in the world that quite compares to the weight of 100-plus essays to be read, considered, critiqued, and graded—without (a) discouraging those students who are genuinely trying to improve, (b) assuming the temperament of an enraged asp, and/or (c) otherwise failing to suppress every id instinct clamoring for validation. Yet, I love this job.

I have observed, sometimes in myself and sometimes in colleagues, a certain tendency to miss the irony we hope students will learn to recognize. Specifically, we can be ironically unaware of (or inattentive to) a crucial disconnect between what we say and what we do. We’re good at talking the talk, but we are not so good at walking the walk, particularly in terms of our audience awareness. We teach students to assess the communication context and adapt their messages to respond to the audience’s needs and desires. But how often do we fail to do that same thing with our teaching? If we are honest with ourselves, I believe the answer must be “far too often.”

Here are five principles I try to reclaim

when I feel myself slipping into that dark night where even my best efforts are revealed as ineffective and the only remedy is a candid self-assessment.

**1. Practice what you preach.** Students can smell a rat from the next building, so if I am insisting upon audience awareness as a basic tenet of effective communication, I’d better be *showing* as well as *telling* them how to do it. Think about it this way: how am I demonstrating audience awareness if I never deviate from the lesson plan I prepared five, 10, or even 15 years ago? How am I modeling flexibility of thought and expression if I insist upon using the same lecture notes, overhead transparencies, or (gasp) PowerPoint slides even when it’s clear I have lost my audience? Are you finding it hard to connect with your students? Practice what you preach: sharpen your audience awareness and adapt accordingly.

**2. Remember that “adaptive” is not a synonym for “easier.”** While teachers can discuss their assignments and exercises with a level of conviction that borders on the religious, suggest experimenting with something new, something that shifts the paradigm from teaching to learning, and you’re likely to experience the academic equivalent of a smack-down, cloaked in the polarizing rhetoric of “rigor” versus “dumbing down” the curriculum. Change is inherently neutral. Adaptive change is good. Just ask the dodo. Wait, the dodo is extinct. Precisely.

**3. Reflect upon the meaning of the verb “to educate,” which comes from the Latin *educere*, “to draw forth.”** We cannot “draw forth” a student’s interest, awareness, and ability if we never leave our ego-

centric elevation on center stage. Drawing forth suggests a reaching in and a pulling out, a teacher-initiated effort to meet the student where he or she is and move forward together. It implies an other-orientation, a willingness to set our own comfort aside and risk entering the student’s cerebral territory—however unsettling that prospect may be.

**4. Put yourself back in their shoes.** Do we recall how frustrating it can be to know what you want to say but find it hard to say it effectively? Were we born knowing how to develop a solid thesis statement and at least x-number of strong supporting points? Humility is an underutilized virtue. Plenty of bright people in this world could not identify the “best” thesis statement from a list of possibilities. It’s helpful to reflect upon that from time to time.

**5. Try and try again.** We have all heard colleagues wax eloquent about students’

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## Finding the Space between Freedom and Control

In the March issue of *The Teaching Professor* I wrote an article exploring teacher control in the classroom. I described my attempts to figure out how much control is enough—enough to show the seriousness of learning and my commitment to creating a climate conducive to it, but not so much that rigid rules dampen the motivation to learn. A number of readers responded. Here's a couple of their comments along with an interesting quote I discovered shortly after I wrote the article.

Jason Fuller, who teaches beginning biology majors at Montgomery College in Maryland, wrote, "I tend to not assert much control in the classroom; instead I encourage students to interact and question. In lab I give students enough instruction so that they are familiar with the equipment we're using and with any safety issues, then set them loose to conduct their experiments. In this way I require them to come prepared, and give them the room to make mistakes (and hopefully learn from them). I've noticed that some instructors have a tendency to assert quite a bit of control, particularly in lab. In these cases, I've observed that the students do not read material before lab and are much more likely to not understand what they were doing. Since everything that happens in the lab is scripted by the instructor, the students are more disengaged from the learning process.

"I do believe that there is an effective middle ground between no structure and rigid structure, particularly for today's students."

My colleague Mitch Zimmer, who teaches and directs the business degree program on the Penn State campus where I used to teach, shared these thoughts. "I'm probably in the rigid control category. I'm a firm believer that the faculty is in charge. For me that means having a seating chart so I can memorize their names, not allowing students to sit in the back rows in classes when the room is bigger

than the enrollment, taking exception to a cell phone so much as ringing (generally, answering it for the first student fixes the problem for all), etc. We cover the topics in the syllabus (although not always on the planned week), and their attendance and participation is required. I expect them to pay attention when I or someone else is speaking. Still my favorite moments are when I 'lose' control and the discussion, on topics from minimum wage to subprime loans to Enron, goes from carefully moderated to an open free-for-all complete with raised voices and passionate arguments. Some day I'll figure out how this balance of control actually works."

I think I hear in both these comments some sense that there might be a middle ground or some sort of give and take between controlling and letting go. And that's the point elaborated by someone in a multiple-author article that appeared in *Pedagogy* 8, (1), 185. "While purely democratic models might be impractical and elitist models inadvisable, my best teaching comes as a result of identifying, developing, and nurturing the productive areas between, on the one hand, my goals, my authority, and my expectations, and on the other, the goals, authority, and expectations of my students." This writer concludes by observing that "navigating these extremes to claim productive spaces in between is no easy task, as the boundaries shift between and among subjects, classes, and individual students." (p. 185)

Once again we are confronted by the complexity that grows out of the teaching-learning nexus. Not only must teachers find a nebulous place between control and the absence of it, but that place is not a fixed point but a moving goal/target. ♥

## Introduction Ideas to Foster Participation

It's important at the beginning of a course for students and their instructor to find out about each other. This exchange of information helps to create classroom climates of respect and fosters a spirit of exchange that can encourage students to ask questions, make comments, and otherwise participate in dialogue throughout the course.

In the second (and significantly revised) edition of Judith Grunert's book on syllabi (now retitled with two additional authors, see below), there are several examples of how faculty share introductory material about themselves on the syllabus. In addition to all the specifics about office location, office hours, and electronic contact information, a business faculty member includes details about his educational history, work experience, research foci, and outside interests. The information is shared in brief, and none of it is terribly revealing, but it still conveys a sense of the personal about the professor (p. 42).

Another example in the book does the same but with a wonderful sense of humor (p. 43). The professor's name appears, after which is listed the customary PhD, but that is followed by "CNN, MTV, DNA, Professor." He lists office hours as they

appear on most syllabi but then notes that he is "open all legal and illegal holidays" but "closed Sunday for mental repairs."

Sharing information about the instructor makes it easy to solicit information from students. Attached to the syllabus can be a form for students to fill out and submit as they leave class. Information requested there might parallel what the professor has shared or might ask other course related questions. There's an example on page 44 in *The Course Syllabus*.

In a recent issue of *College Teaching*, Jan Armstrong describes how she asks students in her large human development and education courses to write her an informal introductory letter. She provides the paper and a bit of class time the first day for students to complete the letter. She lets them decide what to share, asking them to "tell me a bit about yourself and why you are taking this course. Tell me whatever you think I should know about you." (p. 63)

Her follow-up is especially unique. She spends a few minutes at the beginning of subsequent class periods introducing students to the rest of the class. She draws on their narratives taking care not to reveal anything that might be personally private. She might share information about the

student's pet, job, volunteer activities, commute to school, hobbies, etc. "Judging by the smiles, students enjoy watching me play the talk show host, introducing some of my lecture hall 'guests' to each other." (p. 63)

Reference: O'Brien, J. D., Millis, B. J., and Cohen, M. W. *The Course Syllabus: A Learning-Centered Approach*. 2nd Ed. Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Ed.'s note: I wrote a strong endorsement for this book that appears on its cover. In my opinion this book has been our best single source on the syllabus for some time. This second edition ensures that will be the case for some years to come. Every new faculty member struggling to put together a course and syllabus for the first time should have his or her own copy of this book. It not only answers a host of questions about the syllabus, but offers many examples excerpted from a wide range of syllabi. For ordering information, go to [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).

Armstrong, J. (2008). Write me a letter: Challenging anonymity in large-enrollment classes. *College Teaching*, 56 (1), 63. ♥

## Classroom Observation: Guidelines

A second edition of Nancy Chism's excellent sourcebook, *Peer Review of Teaching*, is out. In the opinion of this editor, it is the definitive resource on peer review. Besides providing excellent summaries of relevant research and translating those findings into concrete guidelines, the book is packed with resources including checklists, review questions, and instruments relevant to the assessment of multiple aspects of teaching from course materials to classroom instruction (be it in a lab, studio, clinical setting, or online) to advising to course and teaching portfolios. It's a book no teaching library should be without, and if you read this newsletter regularly, you know that's not a claim this editor makes about

many resources.

To illustrate, here's a condensed version of the seven "overall guidelines" she offers for classroom observation by peers.

1. "It cannot be assumed that peer reviewers are skilled classroom observers." (p. 99) Faculty need to be trained for the task. If they are, the reliability of their observations increases.

2. "A single classroom observation by one rater is not a reliable indicator of teaching quality." (p. 99) How many observations are needed? Some researchers recommend three; others, two different reviewers each doing two observations; still others, three or four reviewers observing between eight and 10 of the instructor's classes.

3. Pre-observation information is needed to provide context for what is to be observed. Observers need details about the course, the instructor, and the students.

4. When in class, the observation needs to be focused. Checklists are a great way of helping the observer look at specific aspects of the instruction. Questions and other more general guidelines can be used. Multiple exams are included in the book.

5. "The observer should try to be as unobtrusive as possible." (p. 99) This means the peer is an observer, not a participant in the class. Once the observer starts participating, the focus is no longer exclusively on

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# Incorporating Process Pedagogy into Grading Student Essays

By Matt Birkenbauer, Northern Kentucky University – [birkenbauerm@nku.edu](mailto:birkenbauerm@nku.edu)

As a very young teacher, I remember pulling all-nighters (not all that infrequently) to get my students' essays back within the one-week limit I set for myself. Even in those days this "cram grading" was miserable and exhausting; but now at 50—especially with the added responsibilities of husband, father, and homeowner—it's all but impossible.

However, it's a prospect I rarely face nowadays, mostly because over the years I've developed a system where I grade student papers the same way I encourage students to write—that is, I've incorporated a process approach to grading student essays. I'd like to share it with others interested in providing students thoughtful and timely feedback on written work.

The process starts with something I call "dipping." I "dip" by going through a batch of student essays to make sure everything is in order. For example, for all submitted essays I require a grading rubric, a rough draft, and a final draft. (For papers using sources, I also require a Works Cited page.) So—while watching TV at night or sitting in my home office as my kids play elsewhere—I'll "dip." In addition to making sure that everything is in order, dipping also allows me to skim the first page or so of the essay. An experienced professor can often discern a great deal about the whole essay during this quick review of the opening paragraphs. For example, this part of the process gives me a feel for which are

the strong and the weak essays in the batch.

The next step in my process involves the use of sticky notes, usually of the 4-by-6-inch size (though any size you're comfortable with will work). At this stage I read through the entire essay and then comment on its strengths and weaknesses. On one sticky note, for a Personal Experience essay, I wrote: "Though Ashley sometimes uses more words than she needs to, she tells a pretty good story, with suspense and buildup. The weakest part for me was the conclusion. What could she do to improve this?" Obviously, I'm not completely certain of my full response here, but that's OK; I don't have to be at this point. That's a benefit of approaching grading as a process.

The advantage of sticky notes is that their very size encourages me to be concise. In addition to my sticky note comments, I also "mark" papers in this stage of the process, in the sense of pointing out sentence boundary and other problems; but I don't heavily edit the essays, since the research from the last 30 years makes clear that bleeding all over a student's essay isn't all that useful.

In the last stage of this process, which is the *only* stage if you're reduced to "cram grading," I comment directly on the student's grading rubric; that is, I transform my sticky-note "writer-based" comments (to borrow from Linda Flower in an article in *College English*) into the reader-based comments the student sees. Because I use grading rubrics, I needn't reprise

everything that is wrong with a particular essay and can distill from my sticky-note comments what is most germane to a student's revising his or her essay. With the high A essays, I generally just give a verbal pat on the back. With essays in the B range and below, I comment more, though usually no more than a brief paragraph. My comments also include underlined or asterisked parts of the grading rubric, sometimes with brief comments in the margin.

Although this process approach may seem more work, it's really not. By the time I'm reading an essay for the third time, I'm more often than not skimming rather than reading the essay in its entirety. And my process approach to grading, like the process approach to writing itself, is often recursive—frequently dipping, for example, blends with marking and even commenting directly on a rubric, if I feel so disposed and have already read the essay in conference or commented on it as a rough draft.

Finally, I think a process approach to grading is fairer to the student. If you have only one shot to respond—that is, if you try to grade a batch of papers in essentially a single sitting—are you giving a truly reflective response? This is particularly a problem for those essays that when first read make us scratch our heads. But if you give yourself two or three times to ruminate over such an essay, your response is likely to be more helpful because you're being more thoughtful. 🍀

## TALKING THE TALK FROM PAGE 1

inability to translate knowledge from one context to another—for example, to think about something they learned in an economics class while reading an assignment for an English class. Are we guilty of the same silo mentality? I wonder. If we only view "revision" as a topic related to writing,

then we are missing the point in a serious way. Revision is a life skill. The point is that experimenting with new instructional strategies is going to be at best a series of educated guesses. Know when to cut your losses and move on to the next method. The more you try, the more likely you are to succeed now and then. And when we succeed, our students succeed.

We do ourselves and our students a

favor to take a step back periodically, scrutinizing our audience awareness and our capacity to adapt as necessary to connect with our students in a productive way. Otherwise, we risk becoming the very epitome of irony, the personification of Strother Martin's famous line from *Cool Hand Luke*: "What we have here is a failure to communicate." 🍀

# Revvng Up the Reluctant Reader

By Barbara Wilmes, Angie Passmore-Howard, and Patty Kohler-Evans,  
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All of us know who the reluctant readers are. They come to class unprepared. They do not respond to questions asked about assigned readings. When in groups, they contribute little, and when asked directly, “Did you do the reading?” they respond negatively. The strategies presented in this article are geared to help these reluctant readers. We have used them in several of our classes, and students have found that the strategies helped them retain information and increase their success in class.

## Response cards

Put students into groups of three or four and give each student an index card. The first student writes a short summary of the reading. The second develops questions on key points in the reading. The third works to clarify the difficult concepts in the material, and student four predicts what content will come next. This last responsibility is optional. Each student writes in response to her specific assigned task. The students then share the responses in their group of three or four. If a student cannot complete the task alone, she may ask a group member for help. Students then share responses with the whole class.

## Reciprocal questioning with prompt cards

In this method, pairs or triads of students ask and answer each other’s ques-

tions after reading a section of the material. The strategy requires no special materials other than the text. The instructor can provide stem questions (a basic question about content) and students then develop more specific questions. Students take turns asking and informing. Each student is responsible for taking notes while the other shares information.

## Jigsaw cooperative learning

Using groups of four or fewer, the instructor divides the passages to be read into sections. Students in each group number off 1 to 4. All the 1s meet and study or review the first passage. All the 2s meet and study or review another, and so on. Each student is responsible for reading and summarizing a passage. Then each teaches her passage to the others in the group.

## Use of graphic organizers or visual devices

In this method, the instructor prepares a graphic organizer, leaving spaces for note taking. These are then handed out to students. As students read required passages, they take notes in the organizer. Categories can include main idea and essential details, sequences of events, cause and effect, or any other information. A great website for locating graphic organizers is [www.writedesignonline.com](http://www.writedesignonline.com).

## Ticket out of class

A ticket out of class (TOC) is a short assessment (as in quiz) given without advance notice at the end of the class. Any material covered in the lecture or in the

reading for that day is appropriate content for a TOC. The TOC is usually short in length, allowing only seconds for each question to be completed, because the answers should come to the student quickly. As the students exit, they give the TOC to the instructor. The purpose of this strategy is to motivate students to read the assigned material and carefully listen in class. The students do not have the option of retaking a missed TOC, and so the TOCs also function as an incentive for students to attend class. Students can receive up to five points per TOC. If used frequently, this can add significantly to a student’s point total.

## Cut it up

For this strategy, the instructor takes headings from the text and types these using a large bold font on colored paper. Then the main ideas covered in each heading area are typed up using a smaller font size. Cut the main ideas and the headings in strips, with one sentence or heading per strip. Working in groups, students put the correct ideas under the headings with or without being able to use their texts, depending on the goal of the activity. Alternatively, groups can work on connecting vocabulary with definitions. If the activity is presented as a contest, groups can race against each other. It adds a bit of healthy competition.

These activities show students that the teacher considers reading an essential part of the class. It makes this a class where doing all the reading the night before the exam isn’t going to cut it. ♥

## GUIDELINES FROM PAGE 3

observing the teaching and students’ responses to it. Moreover, those observer contributions affect responses of both the teacher and the students.

6. Observing for a substantial amount of time is necessary. If the class is an hour long, peers should observe for the entire

hour. It takes time for the instructor and the class to relax and move into teaching behaviors that are typical.

7. Notes, forms, or letters should be completed promptly after the observation. The information gleaned from being in the class remains fresh for a limited amount of time. Details become increasingly difficult to remember when time lapses between

observation and preparation of the feedback.

Reference: Chism, N.V.N. (2007). *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook*. 2nd Ed. Bolton, Mass.: Anker. (Note: Anker Publishing now belongs to Jossey-Bass. For ordering information, go to [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).) ♥

## End Notes: Distinctive Ways to Wrap-Up a College Course

By Margaret Walsh, Keene State College,  
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The ending of a course is worthy of greater attention than it typically receives. Endless time and energy are expended on crafting beautiful syllabi complete with assignment descriptions, an outline of topics and readings, and due dates. We have thoroughly ritualized the start of a new semester, but, typically somewhere between weeks 11 and 14, what seemed like reasonable plans are regrettably sidelined and we launch into catch-up overdrive. It is a time of high stress for teachers and students.

However, if you want students to remember your words, the influential ideas reflected in carefully selected readings, and the work they did to earn their grades, keep these tips in mind when considering the end of a course, whether you are creating a new course or revising an old one. They are ideas easily adapted to courses of different size and in different disciplines.

### 1. Catching up, reflections, and new directions

Avoid the end of semester crunch problem by putting an “open” date on your course outline. Building in time for catching up about two-thirds of the way through a course takes the pressure off at the end. If it turns out that you do not need the time, enrich the content with a lively discussion, a guest speaker, an in-class reading and writing session, or a timely film clip. Set aside time in the final class or two to reflect and connect knowledge learned through the entire course.

### 2. Class presentations: puff or powerful?

I overheard a student talking on his cell, saying that his classes were “done” except for presentations. His comment got me thinking. Ten-minute presentations by everyone in class can be an exciting time for the student presenting, but they can be a bore fest for the rest of the class. What are students doing while they are not making their own presentations? Make sure they are engaged listeners, interacting, tak-

ing notes, and genuinely learning from the experience.

There is nothing worse than sitting through amateur PowerPoint presentations. Give the students guidelines and resources for making effective presentations, show them by example, and reward creativity as well as content. Also, consider spacing the presentations so they don't happen all at once. This makes it easier to thoughtfully integrate them into the readings or class content.

### 3. Class “products” may be suitable for public viewing.

Consider the possibility of creating a larger audience for student work. If students are producing new knowledge, are there others who might benefit from what your students have learned? Your campus outreach office might have ideas about audiences interested in the knowledge produced in your course. Set up a blog, compile an electronic newsletter, design an informational pamphlet, or find another low-cost alternative for sharing key findings of course research. Consult the institutional review board at your institution for approval. Involve students in all aspects of this work and ensure that they earn credit as authors.

### 4. Motivate students to keep a portfolio.

Portfolios are commonly used in graphic design, film, writing, and education. Other fields can adapt this way of preserving progress and showcasing representative work. Lead your students (especially advisees) to think about their papers as having a life beyond their immediate purpose. Crisp position papers can be used as writing samples for graduate school admission. Long after graduation, they are evidence of a student's best work and serve as welcome reminders to professors asked to write a letter of recommendation for a new job prospect.

### 5) Plan a celebratory event with a take-home message.

Successfully completing a challenging

course is a terrific reason to celebrate. When I was an undergraduate, one of my chemistry lab professors invited her class (about 20 students) to her home for dinner. We were treated to a delicious formal dinner, complete with china plates and crystal water glasses. I remember the entire evening, now more than 15 years later. Over the years I have tried to follow this shining example (OK—minus the crystal) at least once a year. We have celebrations in and out of class, and the conversation is as important as the food.

### 6) Suggest Reading and Resources for the Future.

On the last day of class, hand out a list of suggested readings from your own bookshelf, along with a brief commentary on why you're recommending them. Keep the students' background and abilities in mind when making these lists. Give students books you cherish but no longer use (feel-good recycling). Distribute a carefully compiled list of campus or community organizations that will support their desire to learn more or do more. Create a blog where students can share their own suggestions, and keep it open awhile after the semester ends, to see if there is sustained interest in continuing the discussion. Last semester my students took the initiative to begin a book club, and they are reading new nonfiction on social inequality—some of which I may include next time I teach the course.

In sum, when you plan your courses, think about the last days as much as you think about the first days. Work to create memorable experiences that will stay with the students and fuel their continued learning like a good source of protein. 🍌

#### Correction

In our April issue Professor Yvonne Petry should have been identified as a faculty member in Luther College at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan.