

PART 2: “If you really want to know something, teach it” OR Learning to Write by Teaching Writing: Professionalization through Instruction

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There are many lessons in life I keep relearning. One of these lessons is to honor the writing process. I have been teaching writing since 2009, and since that time I have told my students countless times smart adages like, “Don’t wait until the last minute to start writing,” and “a shitty draft is better than no draft.”

I never seem to be able to take my own advice.

Sure, over the years I’ve gotten better. Graduate school forced me to readjust my yardstick for measuring “the last minute”—if something is due next month, chances are you’re already behind. This is just the graduate/faculty version of waiting until the last minute. As the writing projects get larger and larger, my capacity for procrastination grows. It should be no surprise, then, that I write this introduction in the hour before a group meeting about this project. I can hear my own voice in my head, as though I were my own student, “You know you won’t have the best product if you wait until the last minute and don’t give yourself time to revise.”

Oops.

The thing about being a writing instructor is that I am both a teacher and practitioner. Just this last summer—my second summer as a faculty member—I finally started to feel like I had a handle on *how* to write. During graduate school, learning to write happened mostly by trial and error—with an emphasis on “error.” As a graduate instructor and a graduate writing consultant, though, I learned to slow down and put myself in the shoes of the student. Being on the “other” side of academic writing allowed me a chance to try to see where my professors were coming from. It also helped me realize that maybe I should start taking the advice I kept giving the students I worked with. I find that having learned to write through teaching others has made me not only aware of my own process, but has given me a lot more empathy for my students as they struggle to find their own processes and to find how these dynamic processes fit in the ever-changing contexts of their college lives.

As a professor, I find that I cut student writers slack more often than not. I try to do this for myself as well. So does this make me a terrible writer? A terrible teacher? Both?

It definitely makes me human, which is at the crux of the multiple identities of graduate student writers/instructors. This section of the book shares experiences and ideas from a variety of disciplinary perspectives about graduate instructors who teach and learn writing. Specifically, this section starts with a discussion of graduate students teaching discipline-specific writing, moves on to address the importance of graduate training courses, showcases graduate student voices telling their own stories of enculturation, and ends with an example of how graduate students can influence programming.