

Often in my composition classes, I like to bring in colorful markers and large sheets of newsprint so my students can draw out their ideas schematically for a paper's thesis. This process, called mind mapping, is designed especially for visually oriented students, who, perhaps for the first time in their lives, are allowed to let go of the standard linear model of paper writing, and experience the charge of seeing their ideas literally come to life on the page. That's the theory. And last year, during one of our mind-mapping sessions in ENWR 201, I experienced a particularly reaffirming teaching moment when theory and practice converged. While I listened to the busy squeaking and swooshing of markers, and delighted in the focused attention of my students, a proud voice suddenly exclaimed: "I think you should frame this." I moved toward Joe, a spirited, and sometimes distracted, architecture student, to see what had caused his exuberance. And when I looked from the excitement in his face to the big sheet of newsprint on his desk, covered with arrows, bubbles, words, energy, and an intensely beautiful and organic order, I felt a surge of success as a teacher. Pedagogical theory tells us that not all learners are the same. What Joe showed me proved it.

I realize now that the pleasure of that moment rests in the fact that I was fulfilling my three most sacred goals as a teacher. First I strive to create a classroom where every student, regardless of his or her learning style, can achieve success. This means that I must first get to know my students individually through conferences and more informal dialogue, and then respond to their needs by teaching the material – whether it be writing or literature – using a variety of learning modalities. So, in addition to teaching them how to outline a paper, we will use mind maps; instead of lecturing them about style, we will role play in the amphitheater, assuming the styles of various famous writers; instead of devising a list on the chalkboard about the differences between Poe and Emerson, we will conduct a mock trial, where the "Poes" must justify their perversions of Emersonian philosophy to the skeptical "Emersons." In other words, my classroom is an active laboratory. From the first day of class, I encourage my students to get out of their seats and move. They cannot just sit at their desks and attempt to learn passively – because passive learning will not empower them in the rest of their classes or in their lives more generally. So, while I believe that the subjects I teach are important, I know that teaching students how to learn is far more important.

Which brings me to my second goal: giving students the room to make the class their own. To this end, I insist that the classroom be non-hierarchical, which requires me to remove myself gradually as the central authority.

To solidify these dynamics, I require that my students lead several of the classes each semester as "team teachers." Once they know that they will be required to lead a class, they pay much closer attention to my teaching – to the methods that engage them as students, and to ways they can feel comfortable leading. Then, on the days, they teach, I sit in the back of the room and watch as they reflect my own pedagogy back to me, and oftentimes go a step further to refine it. For example, one day in my "Contemporary American Women Writers" class I had the privilege of learning from a team as they assumed dramatic personae to teach their peers Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight*, a collection of dense theoretical essays about our culture's obsession with unrealistic beauty standards and gender norms. On that day, I observed a shy and extremely intelligent student offer around a box of donuts as she discussed her former bout with anorexia; I listened to a Southern student with clownlike lipstick smeared on her face talk about how she is exhausted from feeling that she cannot leave her apartment without perfect hair and makeup; and I watched an athletic male student share his love of soap operas, as well as his sadness at having to keep this pleasure a secret from his buddies. These students were able to do what all good teachers do: that is, take difficult and important theoretical concepts and give them life. And because we had created a safe classroom – one where they knew that they could trust one another and that I would support them – their peers were rapt.

And this leads me to my third goal: fostering a sense of community among the members of the class. In addition to the "team teaching" assignment, I employ a variety of strategies encouraging collaboration. One semester as part of a composition course titled "Imagining Community," my students made the communal focus of the class a reality. Through several experiential assignments, from working as a team to conducting fieldwork in the community, to designing writing, and encoding a collaborative World Wide Web anthology of their work, I saw my students support each other in the various stages of the writing process. The beauty of this style of teaching is that it enables me to be myself with my students, to teach them to value community in the same way that I do, both personally and professionally.

And Joe? Well, he finished up the semester with a unique final "paper" – an architectural model of the imaginary town where Toni Morrison's *Sula* takes place. He, along with many of the students in the class, was deeply moved by Morrison's depiction of the demise of "The Bottom," a thriving African-American community razed in order to build a golf course. His final project, accompanied by a written plea to the novel's real estate developers for a moratorium on their proposed plan, was

an exceptionally creative, heartfelt, and useful exercise. I really believe our class helped change his notion of himself as a member of the University of Virginia and Charlottesville communities. His work, like that of all my students, mattered; it mattered because it played a role in his intellectual development and because it was a tangible product helping him solve problems in the world around him. But perhaps most importantly, I know Joe was empowered by our class to assert his right as a student to work in a medium meaningful to him. In the environment of our class he felt safe enough to trust a diverse group of peers with his work, and to take personal responsibility for his education. I feel incredibly honored that my pedagogy enabled him to take those risks.