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A Philosophy of Teaching Writing

Education is a right, though it should be valued as a privilege, and pursued as a responsibility. Education is integral to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Every person can be a student and a teacher, promoting a better way in some aspect of living.

Teachers must create a safe learning context for students. Educators provide each student with a blank canvas, primed and ready for creativity, motivation and inquiry. The external aspects of students' lives provide a frame for the creative space. All of these elements affect their learning: prior knowledge, cultural experiences, motivation, career goals, self-confidence, family and peer support, learning styles, classroom experience, emotional engagement, perceptions of welcome from the teacher and classmates, nutrition, how much sleep they have gotten, whether or not they have a safe place to go home to, and their expectations of the teacher, their fellow students, and themselves.

If we can shut out the rest of the world for the duration of the class, or even for a few minutes, we can create some kind of equity through that blank canvas, whatever the size, shape and weight of the students' individual frames. We do that by caring for each other generally and individually. We ask the right questions, and influence the mood and atmosphere of the classroom, given external constraints and group dynamics. We discourage behavior that stifles feelings of safety. We encourage self-confidence, and find guidance in baby steps. We build upon whatever each student brings to the task.

Diversity in education is necessary for a fulfilling and authentic experience of the world. Equity does not necessarily mean that everyone gets the same thing, or is expected to achieve the same amount, level, or quality of work, because that might confine some and overwhelm others. Freedom to achieve at the right pace for each student is one key to achieving equality in the classroom, protecting each student's right to learn.

Personal motivation is probably the most important factor in any student's success. If knowledge and skills are not valued, they are short-lived and ultimately irrelevant. While a teacher can provide an inviting context for learning, a significant level of engagement is required from students in order to create a successful learning community. A minimum standard is to be present, open-minded, and respectful. Any effort extended will be returned in large measure, perhaps in a number of concrete and intangible forms.

Often, the creative process is raw and personal, creating a good deal of vulnerability for the artist. A teacher's efforts to establish safety in the classroom as a fundamental right can help create an opening for that process. Expectations for presence, open-mindedness and respect contribute to the essential element of community in the teaching or facilitation of writing. Like fire, water, a blade, or other tools vital to our survival and comfort in the world, words can also be used to detrimental purpose. As writers, we must hold the power of language in awe, and learn to brandish them with skilled, intentional, responsible hands.

We must not forget the essential element of *fun*. If there is one thing I have enjoyed most in all of my years of teaching, it has been the laughter and goodwill inherent in any community of learners. We must infuse our approach to teaching with some belly-shaking laughter. This supplies some intrinsic motivation beyond the altruistic drives inherent in the work of any committed educator. Good humor helps provide safety for learning, builds community, and elicits an important degree of personal engagement in the tasks necessary to master skills, achieve objectives, and meet standards.