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Implementing Student Feedback in the Classroom

As an instructor, one of my biggest fears is that students will walk away from my class without a sense that they have learned anything. One way I thought, at first, to remedy this, was to have daily quizzes. No matter how many times I told them that they were to use their own words and examples, they ultimately ended up parroting the book. They did somewhat better when I asked them to apply what they were learning in class to their own writing, but they did the best when they could look at another students' writing and discuss together how specific concepts were working. I have always been open to asking for student feedback, but it is a rare occasion to overhaul the structure of a course for a method that students claim is the best way for them to learn.

Central to every creative writing class is the workshop. Essentially, a small group of people exchange poems or stories and come back about a week later ready to discuss their peers' work. I do this twice a semester, once for poetry and once for fiction. I taught poetry first this semester, and I divided my students up into four groups of six students for the workshop. A week before the groups met for their workshop, they were to have copies of one long poem (or two short poems) in class to distribute to their group members and me. In addition to reading each others' work, they were also to type a half-page of comments for each of their group members. When it came time to conduct the workshop, each student was to introduce a poem by one of his or her peers and to begin discussion by addressing one of the concerns of the author. Since each group met for fifty minutes, each student's work was discussed for about eight minutes.

The poems discussed in workshop would eventually be revised based on student and instructor comments (at the discretion of the writer, of course), and placed into students' poetry portfolios before spring break. In addition to including other poems they had been working on, I also asked them to complete a one or two page evaluation of the first half of the course. I asked them, "What were some of the most helpful and/or important activities or lessons when learning about and writing poetry?" I had never taught creative writing before, and I wanted to use these evaluations to help me to determine what to do and what not to do when I teach it again.

Many students repeated the same sentiment: the workshop was the most beneficial part of the semester and they wished they had done it more often and for longer periods of time. Ordinarily, there may be a few students who give similar feedback, but it has never happened that they all echoed each other. So instead of using the lesson plans I had made over winter break, I developed new ones with the concept of the workshop at the center.

The way I taught fiction was drastically different than how I taught poetry. In the poetry unit, we had daily quizzes, journal prompts, and while I used group and partner activities to demonstrate certain concepts, students were not, for the most part, looking at each other's writing, but creating something together as a group. In the fiction unit, I still kept all of these activities (except for the quizzes), but added daily writing assignments that students were to bring with them. This accomplished two major things: (1) instead of regurgitating concepts on quizzes, students applied them to their own writing, thus making those concepts more meaningful to their own development as writers, and (2) students were required to write much more than they had during the poetry unit, thus

allowing them to continue practicing their craft. These daily writing assignments were also material students would use to conduct “mini-workshops.” Based on the day’s lesson (for example, creating character), students would formulate questions about what they had written and then exchange their work with a partner. After each student had read their partner’s assignment, they would discuss their questions and suggestions with each other for at least fifteen minutes. This was the norm for every class period in the fiction unit, and I eventually no longer had to tell them to come up with questions to ask their partners. They started discussions on their own without any prompting from me. I even noticed as I walked around the room that they were using fiction terminology quite fluently.

When it came time to do the fiction workshop, I divided the class up into six groups of four to allow each story thirteen minutes for discussion. Since the groups were smaller, this also demanded that each person had to speak considerably more than they had in the poetry workshop. By this time, however, they had been discussing each other’s work on such a regular basis that this was not a problem. They had more to say and were better able to articulate responses to the author’s concerns.

The use and implementation of student feedback in my creative writing class was absolutely essential for student improvement and engagement. While I cannot say for a fact that more incorporation of the workshop was alone responsible for their improvement, I can say with certainty, having conducted an anonymous survey, that they appreciated this change in the course and liked having the opportunity to get immediate feedback on their writing. With their help, I was able to restructure the class to give them more relevant and valuable creative writing instruction.