When I wrote to Dr. Camp, the Director of Composition, earlier this year that I’ve learned as much through teaching English 101 as I have through my own graduate coursework, I was not exaggerating. Learning to teach is every bit as important and challenging as taking credits toward an advanced degree. As the school year and the FTCP program draw to a close, I welcome the chance to reflect on what both have meant to me.

Active learning is a concept I set out to incorporate into my classroom from the start. FTCP discussion regarding its utility in engaging students and helping them to invest in their own education has only strengthened my commitment to using it. On a day-to-day level, I encourage students to partner up or work in groups. I ask them to look at what we are studying and then take it a step further. For example, when we studied argument essays, I asked students to read through the section on logical fallacies in their books. Then, they found examples (text or multimedia) and presented to the class, showing the example and explaining how it illustrated the logical fallacy. Not only did students seem to wake up once the class shifted from lecture mode to activity mode, they also seemed excited to find examples and paid more attention when their peers presented. At the semester’s end, I took active learning in a new direction and asked students to take the revising skills they’d learned and apply them to one of my creative nonfiction essays. I first provided them with two definitions to understand what creative nonfiction is, along with a series of seven questions related to content, style, and comprehension. Thus, students entered the teacher-student dialogue from a position of more power. Instead of simply receiving my comments on their papers, they were invited to respond to one of mine. Their feedback was helpful and sound. My hope is that they feel themselves more active participants in the classroom and in the writing-reading-revising process as a result.
Classroom management is another crucial component of teaching. My first semester, the English 101 class I encountered was somewhat noisy, talkative, and distracting. Setting down guidelines did not change their behavior significantly. Groups of students continued to make the learning experience difficult for their peers. It wasn’t until I began enforcing the standards I set that the class, as a whole, began cooperating with me in their education. Respect is vital. If my students don’t respect my knowledge or competence, they are unlikely to pay attention or retain what I am striving to impart to them. Once I earned their respect through consistent, firm, and fair practices, students seemed to grow. Face-booking, chatting, texting and other distracting behaviors diminished, and the quality of their papers and verbal participation improved.

Although there are innumerable aspects to my teaching experiences, I’d like to end on the idea that students are the primary agents of their own learning. No matter how excellent an instructor I become over years of practice, a student will learn what s/he chooses to learn. My goal is to inspire high-level students to fine-tune their writing and take their critical thinking skills to a new level; encourage and challenge mid-level students to realize their strengths and weaknesses and know themselves as readers and writers; and support lower-level students in beginning to read, write, and think more skillfully, while also informing them of the resources and other staff available to help them make the transition to college successful. Individual conferences, consistency in responding to email inquiries promptly, and conversations before and after class are great tools in gauging a student’s needs. Informal surveys and invitations to assert their preferences also help me to gear the class in a way that makes it most user-friendly and instructive to the greatest number of students. Moreover, I believe students feel more valued and powerful when asked for their feedback, and their participation in shaping the style and
structure of the course seems to go a long way toward making them active agents of their own learning.