"I Didn’t Think They Had It In Them": Students Learning from Students

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The quotation in the title above is from Tom, a student commenting on the performance of his fellow classmates in a final course evaluation. His opinion reflects surprise that his classmates helped him learn so much, and results from an unconventional pedagogy tried in three courses at a small comprehensive university on the East Coast. These three courses all satisfied the Advanced Composition requirement, but they focused on different topics: Women Essayists (WE), Language Awareness (LA), and Advanced Argumentation (AA). Both Women Essayists and Language Awareness were filled with students who needed Advanced Composition because it was required for their major. Although Advanced Argumentation did fulfill the Advanced Composition requirement, only two (as far as I knew) of the students were taking it because they “had” to. Although Women Essayists became a course that felt like an elective, Language Awareness always felt like a required course to some students, especially for those in Media Studies and Education who initially resented having to take it. Even those students, though, felt that they benefited from the unconventional pedagogy, and almost every student in all three classes wrote in their final evaluations not only that they preferred learning from their peers, but that they felt they had learned more. During the three years in which these courses were offered, the students responded to questionnaires and evaluations to help me determine the strengths and weaknesses of the way I designed and conducted the courses.

Some years ago I had been wanting to change the way I teach when I read Jane Tompkins’s “Pedagogy of the Distressed.” I subsequently forgot the details, but I must have unconsciously retained the spirit, since several of her thoughts reappear in these classrooms, especially “trust the students” and “less is more” (659). I also remember that the motive for her innovations had been fatigue (660). While I was not at the same stage of weariness the first time I tried this, I was discouraged by the passivity of my students and wanted to change the dynamics of the classroom.

I did not think, however, that my classroom at that point was very traditional. I was familiar with Freire’s theory of the banking model of education and had already abandoned lectures. I had followed Erika Lindemann’s advice that “teachers may give students responsibility for devising their own assignments, assigning one another research and writing tasks, setting appropriate
deadlines, and revising drafts together. Collaboration, community, and responsibility are the watchwords” (255). I had agreed with Wendy Bishop, Patricia Bizzell, Jim Corder and Kathleen Boardman that teachers who wrote with their students found themselves more actively involved. I had shared my writing with students. I understood with Carol Gilligan and the Women’s Ways of Knowing collective (Belenky et al) that non-hierarchical structure could be empowering to non-traditional students. I encouraged collaborative small groups and oral reports. I believed in and practiced a student-centered pedagogy, I thought—and yet, there were still too many days when the students seemed to feel it was my responsibility either to entertain them or to think for them.

Three years ago, I became ready to change my teaching practice when I was listening to my first-year students present oral reports on their research papers at the end of the semester. I was relaxed—most of my work was finished, and now the students would speak. They had prepared for days, maybe weeks; they were nervous, intense, and deeply committed to their projects. The class was engaged, listening carefully to the report and discussing the topic afterwards. I hardly spoke, but they did not need me to speak. We were pressed for time for the students’ presentations, and the class wanted the discussions to go on (they had ten minutes for each).

I wondered if I could create a course that motivated this level of engagement. About a month later I considered this question at a summer workshop at the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College. We were writing about an early learning experience, and since I couldn’t think of one beyond tying my shoelaces, I tried to recall my most intense learning experiences in college, none of which seemed to involve a professor directly. They seemed, rather, to involve working on my own. I think I was remembering these experiences because I was writing; I had not thought of them in years and doubt whether I could have remembered them had I not been physically writing. I was connecting this workshop experience with my own teaching situations. Although I had often promised myself to allow more time for the kind of in-class writing that was inspiring me at Bard, it was the first to go when time got short. And, while I encouraged independent work, I had been reluctant to give over class time to students beyond brief oral reports and collaborative group work.

In that Bard workshop, those of us who related our early learning experiences had written about our own enterprise. As the workshop progressed, we read what Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotsky had to say about how people use what they know to learn more, especially by “doing” rather than just listening. I was particularly struck that summer by how much knowledge we workshop participants already had but did not know we had until we discovered it ourselves. We used three heuristics that could be transferred to the classroom: the act of writing, independent research, and teaching others.

My first try to change classroom social relations involved turning students into teachers; I followed Lucy McCormick Calkins’ advice. As she says of herself, “When I know I will be teaching a class on a topic, I become a powerful
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learner. Everywhere, I see related anecdotes, ideas, and quotations. Because I teach, I learn" (qtd in Nelson 72). I discovered that student teachers were just as good as, and perhaps better than, I was myself at enabling the class as a whole to learn. Students learn from each other, and the experience is better than learning from the teacher. Of the forty-three students in these three experimental courses, only two wished they had had more "instruction" from me.

In certain basic ways I turned the course over to the students. At first they did not believe it. My experiment was similar to Tompkins's; I also see that others have tried what she calls the "dialogic" classroom with less success, especially when it comes to students' designing the course and determining the reading. For example, Frederic Gale, in "Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed" talks about how difficult it is to maintain a true dialogic classroom; he points out that the ideal is that "students would participate actively in the classroom conversation, if not lead it, and be active in the development of a reading list, but that is something to be hoped for and not often achieved" (31). He adds that "the students ought to select the reading materials, and one of them should lead the group discussion the week that his or her choice of readings is discussed. I have found it ... difficult to achieve this ideal" (33). I was also skeptical after my first try in my course, Women Essayists, because that course seemed special in so many ways that I was almost ready to dismiss it as one of those lucky "good" classes. My second and third attempts, respectively in the courses "Language Awareness" and "Advanced Argumentation" worked just as well. These three good experiences persuaded me that this is pedagogy worth sharing.

As I trace the experiences in these classes that led to my belief that students learn best from each other, I will also point out the drawbacks. Some cannot be avoided, but most can be ameliorated with preparation.

Because my premise is students learn best from teaching, the only "requirement" in each course was long presentations by students. In the syllabi I included lists of several topic areas from which students could choose, although they were not limited to these. I did not want the lists to be prescriptive or proscriptive. Many students used an item on the list as a prompt for their "class." I also gave students a packet of writing-to-learn exercises that included instructions on freewriting, looping, clustering, mapping, outlining, collages, found poems (very popular), dialectical notebooks, SLU (seen, lurking, unseen), and other heuristics culled from Aristotle to Zinsser.

Because they initially did not trust their peers to be sources of knowledge ("I didn't think they had it in them"), students in all three classes expressed serious doubts about this approach: "I resented Dr. Warriner's almost blatant refusal to lead the class or at least to set up the requirements. I did not want to trust my peers to make such choices about a class I was in" (Julie WE). "Allowing us to take charge of this class ... is a bad idea. Bad meaning that it will allow us to concentrate on the course and get more involved [I] but I don't think to give us that much power is good" (Anthony LA). "I think the idea of the students running the class is crazy. ... I'm sort of lazy and would rather have someone
tell me what I will be doing then I will just do it" (Heather LA). Other students didn't believe that I would follow through—"you say we would be completely in charge—I doubt that" (Anthony) and still others were excited at the prospect: "This class is just what I need!" (Jim LA).

I explained that the course must meet college standards and expectations, so they should try to make it rigorous enough to satisfy an accreditation committee. Even though they may not have known exactly what that meant, they responded to the implication. Usually there were some who considered slacking off ("you mean we can write NO papers?") but most students restrained those who tried to make it too easy. Still, they were not comfortable with the degree of responsibility. My class notes from Women Essayists indicate their stress: they didn't know the writers or the material, I was supposed to be the teacher, it was my responsibility to make the assignments, I was the one with the knowledge, they would trust me. Each semester I had to be firm in my insistence that they were capable of designing the course themselves, and eventually they would work together, negotiating, arguing, compromising, not compromising, until they hammered out their course agreements (see Appendix).

Each time when the agreements were completed, a surprising change occurred. The students suddenly felt responsible for the class. Most of them began research on their presentations immediately, and all consistently completed the assignments given by fellow students. They felt less compelled to finish my assignments, on the few occasions when a class fell to me. In all the courses, and more so in the ones with fewer students, I was responsible for some of the classes. Kelly (WE) reflected that "each piece of writing was an extension of myself... nothing was written up just so I could make my one entry per week quota." Daniela (WE) speculated that a student might think that "you may subconsciously go easy on yourself if you are giving yourself the work, and that maybe you aren't getting your money's worth. But the thing is that once you are forced to make your own decisions, you also set your standards higher because you feel an obligation to yourself to really try and see just how creative, ambitious, and hard working you can be." Ernesto (LA) responded to the students' assignments this way: "I really live with them, inside, and I feel that my cells eat the knowledge... with voracity: this is so nutritious!"

One demonstration of the students' achievements was that seven of them felt confident enough about their writing to submit to outside sources. While a few were in the school newspaper, most were in the Hartford Courant or The Connecticut Post. Daniela, above, sent me her published article (The Hartford Courant, 6 March, 1994) with this note written in the margin: "Look! RIGHT ABOVE Ellen Goodman!" Kathleen (AA) submitted her essay on organic gardening to local newspapers after the students in the class urged her to try.

The students' investment manifested itself in forms other than writing. One snow day, when only seven out of twenty students could get to campus, the students (in Language Awareness) decided to stay in spite of the ice building up outside, and concentrate on style. We spent the session working with each
other's writing style. The atmosphere was adventurous, as is often the case in "survival" situations, and the students felt that it was their class, and they didn't want to waste it. When a student missed a presentation because of illness or other emergency, the class did not look to me to fill in for the absent one partly because I refused to do it anyway. On one occasion when I was late for my "turn" teaching, Melissa (AA), a young woman trained in formal logic, took over and was explaining Toulmin's informal logic on the board. She had found an excerpt from _The Uses of Argument_ in our _Course Reader_ and was helping others with the idea of "warrants." That class served as an example to me of when I should restrain my contributions. I was tempted several times to interrupt and make this difficult exercise easier, but they eventually figured out a number of warrants without help. Had I taken over, it would have slowed their growing senses of achievement, autonomy, and conviction that they could learn what they needed from each other.

The students' investment also showed in their attitudes towards other class members. They were enthusiastic, prepared and respectful. Sometimes, classes were chaotic or divisive. The students cared about the material, and were less reluctant to argue with a student presenter than with an instructor. A few of the students in their final evaluations (especially in Women Essayists) wished I had stepped in more often to calm down some of the more hostile encounters, and sometimes I wished I had too, but I also wonder if my intrusion would have defeated the sense of responsibility students felt for the class. One student (WE) wrote anonymously, "while it was good to vent anger and feelings (which may have sparked reactions that led to writing), I wish there had been fewer episodes because they did not conclude anything." Others mentioned how much they had learned about how to argue and to respect others' viewpoints because I refrained from stepping in: "Sometimes the class got into heated discussions, which I felt was a great way to learn" (Also anonymous, WE).

A conflict that exemplifies the nature of the friction in the Women Essayists class occurred with Julie's assignment, which asked the students to compare the styles of Susan Sontag in "Women's Beauty: Put Down or Power Source" and Alice Walker in "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self." "My topic," Julie explained, "was supposed to be a comparison of the style of the two essays, to analyze both of their approaches. But, for some reason (?), the topic of the conversation became 'Beauty,' which was fine with me." Although Julie said it was fine, she regretted the loss of a discussion on style, and what happened in class that day set a tone of antagonism that lasted several class sessions. One of the students had been "demoted [at work] unfairly due to discrimination (I wasn't pretty enough to get fair treatment) which I could not prove." She was therefore feeling hostile about public standards of beauty. The conversation shifted to topics associated with beauty—makeup, clothes, bodies—and quickly became a free-for-all, with two gay women defending their decision to wear makeup, two of the men defending their approval of makeup "sometimes, when you want to look good," and other women heaping disdain upon those who cared about such
"superficial" things. The discussion moved from beauty to the rights of citizens to take the law into their own hands and deface public property for a principle when one of the gay women told how she had "removed" an offensive "ladies" symbol from a restroom door, a woman in a bustle.

Although I contributed to the discussion, I did not try to direct it, though maybe I should have, since it deteriorated into an acrimonious wrangle. Most of the students referred to it again with mixed or angry feelings, and several of them wrote follow-through "letters" to each other. Despite these tensions, debates created involvement not often found in a traditional classroom. The students did learn about rhetorical style; they were affectively engaged in discussing the assumptions behind the American portrayal of beauty in the two essays, and they presented their own arguments more effectively because they wanted to persuade other members of the class of their opinions. They read and listened; they felt the trial and error of confrontation; they tasted what can happen with effective and ineffective arguments.

The classes became progressively less agonistic. The Women Essayists class was so new that I was reluctant to assert much control at all, for fear of inhibiting the students' spirit. Or it may have been that I expected gender tensions to be volatile. However, there developed more tension between the gays and straights in the class than between men and women. Although the level of discomfort may have been high, the level of attention to rhetorical strategies was also high, removed from the abstract and comfortable in the experiential.

The Language Awareness class also showed discomfort, though here it was content-based rather than gender-based. The students expressed strong opinions about the assignments. For example, opinions clashed sharply over slang, profanity, rock lyrics, Black English, the language of AIDS, tabloid journalism, and advertising—topics chosen by the students. When they argued over these issues, they were aware that they were frequently speaking from their individual cultures and thus avoided acrimony. They were also collectively at approximately the same "level" of awareness (of language issues), whereas one of the salient complaints in the Women Essayists course was that some of the students knew all about the Women's Movement and its issues, and some knew next to nothing. The LA students, perhaps, felt more equal in their degrees of ignorance and knowledge. Most of the time their arguments would start over the issue of the day, i.e. the status of Black English, then they exchanged personal stories and information from reading material, and most of them found their minds had changed toward flexibility and provisional thinking. The arguments were more obviously (though perhaps not subliminally) constructive.

Advanced Argumentation was, oddly enough, the most irenic of the three courses. Although one might expect a course in argumentation to be, well, argumentative, the focus was on rhetorical strategies and techniques, not on explosive subjects like gender and language. The students paid intense attention to "audience awareness": they spoke and wrote of their awakening to a sense of audience, to learning how to be in another's shoes, to tailoring one's topic to the
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Students wrote that they enjoyed learning from each other and that their experience was significant. The kinds of learning fell into two general groups: the content of the presentations and attendant reading and writing assignments; and the high interest sustained when peers chose the topic and talked about it. The content of the students' choices is worth reporting. Here are a few examples.

Jim (LA) illustrates how a common topic—diversity—can be personalized while referring to larger issues. He records his preparation: "I would talk about culture and the role it plays in the way we interpret, and generate, behavior; I would talk about the foundation of ethnocentrism and its expression in both segregation and assimilation; and I would discuss the experience of various minority groups in the United States, especially Native Americans and African-Americans. My experiences in classes both for my major and my minor helped me in organizing this presentation." Jim "studied up" for weeks to build on his existing knowledge; when he made his writing assignment for the class, he dropped his specialized language and worded it to elicit a personal response: "write a journal entry in which you reflect on some of the ways your attitudes, values and behavior have been shaped by your family, peers, ethnic community, church or by society in general. Guided by the 'Sounds of Silence' article [one of his reading assignments, by Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall], think of examples that are less obvious, that you are not normally aware of. How do you think they would affect the way you would relate to members of another culture?" Jim worried that he would "take over" the class because he liked to lecture and felt he had much to say; however, his writing assignment provoked students to assert themselves. Each student spoke of "hidden" experiences that had shaped their attitudes and beliefs. At one point the speaking competition was so great that Jim glanced at me with concern, then shrugged, grinned, and let them have the floor. The mesh of private revelation and public issue created a session of uncommon vitality. Jim was very pleased that "his" topic and assignment had been responsible for such a good class.

Ernesto (LA), a student from Bolivia accustomed to formal lectures, and somewhat disconcerted by the style of this class, first responded in his journal entries with a series of questions about my seriousness. But he changed his topic, shortly, to the readings and the other students' preparations, as well as to stories about life in Bolivia. For his own presentation, he distributed what was apparently an essay written by someone with an Hispanic name, "Eco." Ernesto had written it himself, then formatted it on his printer so it would look as though he had copied it from a book (he never did claim authorship). The essay was an
unusual narrative, multivocal, multicultural, reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldúa or Susan Howe, or, in its calmer moments, Isabel Allende. It was fantasy, a fairy-tale, a myth, a trip through the day of an old woman in a Latin American country. Written in a style that varied from paragraph to paragraph, sometimes from sentence to sentence, occasionally it was difficult to follow, amusing, poignant, and reflective of "a day in the life." Along with this essay, Ernesto assigned Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." In class, he pointed out how Orwell's strictures could be stifling; from a Latin American perspective, according to Ernesto, they were worse than stifling: they destroyed the natural movement of the mind, they squeezed vocabulary, they even prevented communication because they made language and expression too homogeneous. Ernesto got an argument from some of his classmates, but his perspective affected our class discussions from then on.

The initiatives the students brought to their assignments and presentations was perhaps the most salient feature of these courses. The students' proposals contrasted with many more conventional projects found in writing courses. Two collaborating African-American students (LA) assigned their classmates several articles on Black English, and then asked them to re-write the Gettysburg address into Black English. On that occasion I was the only person who was uncomfortable reading her rendition, and the students stood and stamped for one rendition by a normally silent black young man. Another assignment (WE) asked students to write an essay imitating the style of Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and in that class also the students competed to read their imitations. A rhetoric major (AA) showed clips of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, then asked us to cover our heads with our jackets while listening to their debate (we all hoped no senior administrator would stroll by our classroom to see us watching television with hoods over our heads). We then wrote our impressions, after which she explained the image problems that TV had presented for Nixon. A student exploring sexism in language (AA) assigned the following: "Write a short essay about a first-year college student who wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer but for financial reasons dropped out of college to become a blue-collar worker." Only one student in the class caught on, realizing halfway through her essay that an incipient doctor or lawyer (or blue-collar worker) could be a woman—she then changed the student's gender. Every other student assumed a male, underscoring the student’s point about gender assumptions. I now use this technique to introduce my classes to the CCCC's resolution on sexist language. One last example is the assignment by Tom and Lynda on women journalists. One reading was by Anka Radakovich, someone who had been unknown to me but not to the class. I was so unnerved by her essay ("Girl Talk, Part Deux") that I completely deconstructed it, probably to defuse it, as did the more self-proclaimed feminists in the class. Although this text struck me as inflammatory, and I would not have included it myself, it elicited highly charged discussion about sexism in women, the nature of sexism, and the nature of female sexuality and female bonding.
One of the questions I have about my teaching experience is whether student activated courses enable people from different cultural, economic, and ethnic backgrounds to be comfortable with exchanges that foster learning while at the same disclosing those backgrounds. It is difficult for me to tell whether there were particular patterns that distinguish these assignments and presentations along those lines. It is true that Ernesto’s Latin American perspective broadened ours. Keran, from Haiti, though, took a traditional route, exploring the media from a useful but not culturally distinctive angle. The Black English collaborators were African-American; Carolyn was from an environment that included poverty and recovery from crack, and Cheryl was economically comfortable. What does seem to matter is that each student brought a perspective to a topic that was different from those I may have brought from professional experience. Rather than several weeks of my prism on the world, we had several prisms. Because of the makeup of the classes, these perspectives naturally reflected different cultural and economic contexts. The ways of knowing were indeed varied, sometimes because the student was from a different ethnic background from the majority in the class; sometimes because he or she reflected a contextual, non-hierarchical, web-making way of knowing that may be new to many students; sometimes simply because the freedom of the structure on one hand, and the demands the students put on themselves on the other, galvanized students to feats of creativity not ordinarily seen in the college classroom.

I did notice a shift in the kinds of exchanges that combined the personal with the public in the class discussions. In all three courses students enjoyed providing examples from their lives to make a point, further a discussion, or add an example. I am reminded in particular of Ernesto’s response to Rose’s presentation on profanity. In Ernesto’s household, he told the class, his return from school was marked by his use of mild profanity and a “freer” use of language. His parents admonished him sharply to “respect the house” and were distressed over what they perceived as his “informality.” Rick, from another culture, responded that his experience had been that age fifteen was the cut-off point: before fifteen, no profanity allowed; after fifteen, anything goes. Other students joined the discussion, and the links between profanity, maturity, and education became the topic of the day. The question of how education changes personal behavior and family relationships reappeared throughout the semester. Even though this class and others like it sometimes felt as though they were teetering on the edge of bull sessions, the students usually re-focused their discussion after exchanging their anecdotes. It seemed to me—and, I believe, to them—that these exchanges were fruitful, revealing, and substantive. They gave the issues personal resonance; they gave the stories academic pertinence.

One refrain I heard repeatedly, especially near the end of the semesters, was that the students felt empowered by the experience of these classes. As presenters, they enjoyed the responsibility and the success they had with teaching their classmates. They were excited and pleased by the high class interest and the response to their own topics and ideas. For example, Becky (WE)
chose as her topic “mothers and daughters,” and assigned a number of essays for reading. About her “class,” she recalls that her writing assignment—one paragraph each on two different writers, exploring which one had more impact and why—was designed in part to guarantee that her “classmates would do the reading and would therefore contribute to the discussion.” She adds that “my underlying strategy was to get my audience to really think about their experiences as a child and how those experiences led up to the present relationship they have with their mother. This way the written essays by the women authors have become more than just essays. They become a reminder of the past and then a reflection.” Becky found the responses of the class “very interesting because of the diversity in terms each one used for description. Many themes were also pulled out of each essay and then were supported by the text. This was a great exercise. It really enabled us as a collective group to examine a piece of literary work in all different perspectives. I truly enjoyed the experience and learned a great deal.”

Becky’s assessment of her success is accurate, but also modest. I knew from watching her and I learned later from talking to her that this presentation for her was career-defining. She had always admired teachers and yet had thought her chances of being one were completely scutded by her shyness, her tendency to blush, and her belief that everything went out of her head the minute she was the center of attention. Becky was also one of the most skeptical students; she liked structure and lectures and direction, and she was initially the most uneasy student in Women Essayists. But the day of her presentation, Becky went up to the front of the class, arranged her extensive notes on the podium, and became what she had hoped she could be but had not thought possible: a college professor. She subsequently decided to major in English, enrolled in a study abroad program in England to broaden her horizons, and now is applying to graduate school to get her PhD. She says her professional resolution began for her that day of her presentation.

In addition to feeling empowered by the teaching experience and learning from it, the students also felt empowered by learning from each other. Many commented in their final evaluations how surprised they were at the range of knowledge of their classmates. They praised the diversity of topics and pedagogical methods, and compared the course favorably with others. One student (AA) (nameless because the final evaluations were anonymous) wrote: “It was a breath of fresh air. This promoted an immense amount of stimulation for me... I felt a willingness to learn more than in any other area of study ever.” Tom (WE) wrote in his self-evaluation, “I was also very surprised, at the end of the course, that the work actually began to pile up; had we actually assigned ourselves a heavy load of work? It may have been a heavy load, but I don’t think it was in any way unfair or even ‘too much’; I think it was perfect.” Tom also wrote: “I also learned from my classmates, some of whom I was already friends with, and didn’t think they had it in them, and also, I think you learned from us.” And another final evaluation (LA): “It really surprised me to see how much we, as students, could do on our own to set up class structure, assignments, peer review, etc. AND then actually do it and do it well.”
I agree that the students were more actively engaged in their learning. Simple things such as the posture of the students indicated their involvement; they sat up and forward when their classmates were presenting. They all spoke a great deal; one of the problems for presenters was to regain control of the class after relinquishing it to discussion. The students told me that they paid attention partly because they wanted attention paid to them. Several students used the presentations of their classmates as springboards for their own topics; they would become intrigued by something said in class discussion, or by an assignment, and they would take that experience as their own starting point. For example, the class on profanity got Jim thinking about family culture, which led to his class on diversity. This cross-fertilization can happen in conventional classes when students use something the instructor said or assigned, but the results are not likely to be so varied. Students learned to exercise their freedom and chose topics that I may not have covered. I have little expertise in media studies or linguistics, for example, but several students chose topics concerned with television, advertising, slang, profanity, and ethics in media. Maddy (LA, AA) asked the class to assemble an "ethical newspaper"; her assignment had been urged by another student's presentation on ethics in advertising. She also drew on her experience in her journalism major.

In fact, many students started with material from other disciplines which made the content of the advanced composition courses interdisciplinary and wove disciplines together in unconventional configurations. Maddy combined her experience with the "ethical" newspaper and her education classes to write a research paper and make a presentation (in AA) on how to infuse ethical values into the elementary school system. Heather (LA) revisited Play It As It Lays because she had wanted to write about it without the "constrictions" of "literary criticism"; she explored its use of language in the Language Awareness course. As journalism majors, Tom and Lynda (WE) presented modern women in journalism. Linda (WE, AA) drew on her political science major and argued in favor of the electoral college. Nicki's experience with Media Studies helped her critique the televised debates of JFK and Nixon. I believe that the respect the students felt for each other stemmed in part from the knowledge they had built on from these other disciplines, as well as from their different cultures and their current research.

Spontaneous collaborative presentations were a feature of these courses. Several students teamed up in pairs, some in conventional ways and others more innovatively, and all but one of the collaborations provided satisfying work relationships. The satisfied students mentioned how much they had learned from their partner, how helpful it had been to plan and discuss together, and (usually) how surprised they were at how well their presentations went. Collaborative presentations were twice as long, and therefore sometimes more anxiety-producing despite the comfort of having a partner. These presentations were, with one exception, more relaxed yet just as productive. Interestingly, in most cases the collaborators chose to stay seated in the classroom rather than present from the front of the class. They wrote of their satisfaction with the
preparation as well as with the presentation itself. Lynda (WE) learned about women journalists from Tom, but she also learned how to budget time and do extra research. Nicki and Linda (AA) felt that their decision to join "the rhetoric of debate" and "the rhetoric of JFK" was perspicacious. The one unhappy pair (LA) experienced frustration because one partner worked much harder than the other, and was resentful that the other was lifted, so to speak, by her wings. However, it was clear to the class who had done the work, and the students pulled no punches in their critiques.

Colleagues have asked whether I intend to conduct all my classes this way. My answer is that, once you have made this leap, it is difficult to go back. However, I have not tried this approach—turning the whole class over—with first-year students because I think students respond better when they are somewhat acculturated to the academy. To some extent, all my classes, including those for first-year students, are decentered, and in the latter classes I require oral reports, negotiated grading contracts, and self-evaluations of their journals. They have choices for paper topics. Some entering students have little sense of the workload necessary for college level classes, and some (away from home for the first time, with unprecedented personal autonomy) are not in a frame of mind conducive to self-discipline.

A handful of my students did not work very hard on their presentations and fell flat as a result. They suffered the consequences in the critiques of their colleagues, and in their own self-evaluations, since they could not claim credit for a job poorly done. Two students in the Language Awareness course, which had more students and therefore fewer of my own presentations, wished for "more instruction"; although they did praise their classmates in their final evaluations, they wrote that they preferred the lecture format, where they could just listen and learn. Sometimes the classroom in all courses felt anarchic, though that isn't always bad. Students in all three classes had decided on a portfolio system, which was an unqualified success in terms of my own ease because I did not need to grade (only respond to) papers and because grades lost their threatening effect. However, a few students evaluated themselves in ways I thought were inaccurate and I initiated a sometimes uncomfortable re-assessment. On the other hand, most students had done more work than I had expected. Those final evaluation sessions, in private in my office, were often simple chats that provided some closure to the course. On two occasions when I disagreed with a student's self-assessment, the students (LA) immediately acknowledged that they had asked for a half-grade higher than they thought they deserved, and they admitted that they had been goaded by students outside the class. They seemed uncomfortable with their decision to try for the higher grade and accepted my judgment. Two students in Women Essayists also gave themselves one-half grade higher than I would have. I had assumed that they had submitted work from another course because it was not in response to any assignment, but they convinced me (accurately, because I later checked) that they had chosen to do this work because of their freedom. These were the most uncomfortable
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assessments because the students were insulted by my assumption. Two students (WE) gave themselves one full grade lower than I wanted to give them. They may have been modest, or they may have hoped I would raise the grade because they knew I had a high opinion of their writing from my written comments. Some students refused to grade themselves. They wrote the self-evaluations, but left out the grade. "Deciding on a letter grade for my performance needs to be decided by both Dr. Warriner and myself. I feel that if I give my own grade it will be subjective. If the both of us decide I can accept it as being objective and appropriate" (Becky WE). In those cases, we discussed the evaluations at length, considered each element being assessed, and the students responded to my request for a "verbal ballpark grade," which satisfied us. There were no grade differences in Advanced Argumentation.

I feel some discomfort with my assertion of final authority when I claim to have turned the class over to the students, but the students do not seem to mind. In the beginning, when they are discussing evaluation policy, a few have questioned the disparity between my assertion and my practice. By the end of the term they realize how much they have determined the direction of the course, and they trust the negotiation process. Those reluctant to give themselves grades are willing to write the evaluation, although they consider it difficult: "I've never had to evaluate myself academically. It's always been done for me, so this will be difficult" (Becky WE). "O.K., now comes the hard part. Now I have to ask for a grade. I'm really no good at this" (Tom WE). After finishing her evaluation, Kelly (WE) writes "I fully realized exactly how much time and effort each one of us must have put into this class." Grades aside, the final evaluation provides students with an overview of their work, and an occasion for reflection. It may not be fair to say the class belongs entirely to the students when I retain the right to final judgment, but I think the negotiating process allows teacher and student shared authority.

I expect to continue this pedagogy, for the pleasure the students take in it and for the pleasure I take in using it. I tried to do all the reading and writing assignments they devised. There were times when I could not keep up, and I would sacrifice the writing assignment, but I paid a price then because my interest level would dive. When I completed the work, I had something to offer, and I know the students felt encouraged, especially near the beginning of the term, when they realized I had done their assignments. Since we submitted our writing to the student in charge of the class, everyone saw what I produced under pressures similar to their own. There were occasions when the playing field seemed "too" level to me and I wondered if my authority would be diminished in their eyes. As far as I can tell, however, they only gained more respect for each other. We take a risk when we make knowledge accessible to anyone and everyone, not just ourselves. Hephzibah Roskelly, writing about group work, puts it this way:
As teachers, we have to take on the risky business of looking at the academic house we live in, and the ways we invite students into it. We have to be willing to look at how we ourselves entered, how much we brought with us, how much we were forced to leave at the door. We have to make ourselves brave enough to risk the dissent that inevitably comes when democracy is in action. Once teachers do that, we’ll see the work of the small groups in our classes become the real work in the class, with students negotiating their own ideas against and around the ideas they’re offered. When students find a real voice, their own and not some mimicked institutional voice, both students and teachers acknowledge the possibility of the real change that might ensue.

Not all of these students eschewed the institutional voice, though some did; what they did was make that bridge between their own personal voice and the institutional vehicle of teaching a class. And they were nothing if not democratic.

Is it possible to measure the depth and breadth of learning in these courses compared to others taught more traditionally? My impression is that the students had better classroom experiences because of the following: they consistently did all the reading, though the reading load was probably less than I would have assigned; they read more carefully because they wanted to be included in the discussions; they wrote more than other students I have taught (and they said themselves that they wrote more than ever before). The classes consistently sustained high interest; attendance was the best I’ve seen; and, finally, the richness and complexity of the classes are indicated by the varied subject matter, presentation styles, discussion content, and student-generated reading material that I have outlined here. In addition to my impressions, some of which have been included here, that indicate the high degree of their classroom involvement. Their enjoyment is linked less to my influence than to their discoveries of their own knowledge and ability. They mention their control now; they feel they will always be learning. Tom sums it up: “This class has taught me that I will always be learning, even in the most unexpected places and from the most unexpected people. That is what I learned.”

Works Cited


**Appendix**

**EN378 Women Essayists M-Th 1:40-2:55 Fall 1993**

**Course Agreement and Assignments**

The students in this course have decided to use the portfolio system for collecting and evaluating their work, and have reached consensus that the following work will be completed by the given dates and included in their portfolio. They have also agreed that all items will be ungraded until the end of the semester, at which time the student and professor will decide in conference what grade the student should receive, based on attendance, oral presentation, journal and papers, as well as a final written self-evaluation by the student.

**Portfolio Ingredients**

Journal entries: a minimum of one per week, preferably more, of informal writing. Such writing will be composed of freewrites (focused and unfocused), reader responses to texts, creative writing, letters to each other, to the professor, or to the authors of the texts, and other kinds of informal writing listed in the syllabus, such as “found poems,” looping, metacognitive writing, dialectical notebooks, etc. Exercises from *Developing a Written Voice* could also be included.

Oral Presentation: Each student will present either a 20-30 minute presentation, or a 45 minute class on the author[s] or topic of choice. The student is responsible for distributing additional reading material in advance of the presentation (Alison will duplicate) and for designing the reading and/or writing assignments (Alison will duplicate them as well).
Responses to Oral Presentations: Each student will write a 1-2 page informal response to each oral presentation. Alison will make one copy of each of these so they can become part of the student’s portfolio and also can be given to the presenter.

Papers: 3 formal papers with deadlines, and 3 revisions of these papers (without deadlines). The papers fall loosely into the following categories.

Paper #1: On an author that you choose; could be a critique, a biographical sketch, an imitation of style, or all three.

Paper #2: An essay on your own topic; could be on any of the topics on the “list,” or prompted by class discussion, or anything of interest to the women essayists—perhaps a response to your reading.

Paper #3: An argument. Could be taking a stand on an issue that is developed in the course or in your reading; could be an editorial or forum piece prompted by class discussion and additional reading on the topic.

The formal papers are due for peer review on:

Monday, October 25th; final due date Monday, November 1
Thursday, November 18; final due Monday, November 22
Thursday, December 2; final due Thursday, December 9

We have not yet decided which papers should be handed in on which dates; you may end up handing in whichever paper seems right to each student on that date.

Portfolio Evaluation: Each student will write up a formal portfolio self-evaluation at the end of the semester (and some students may want to write one at mid-semester). As mentioned above, the portfolio will be composed of journal entries, formal papers and revisions, classmates’ responses to and one’s own notes on the oral presentation, and anything else the student feels has bearing on his or her grade. This document will assess the ingredients in the portfolio and will take into consideration other matters such as class attendance and participation. Then in conference the student and professor will decide on a grade. No grades will be given until this conference unless the student makes a different agreement with the professor.

Therefore,

Minimum Portfolio Ingredients:

13 journal entries
oral presentation notes and classmates’ responses (approx 10)
10 1-2 page responses of your own to classmates’ presentations
3 formal papers
3 revised papers
1 self-evaluation

This agreement can be revised at any time by mutual agreement between the professor and students.