Developmental Writing Teaching Circle Overview

Since becoming a full-time faculty member I have regularly attended a teaching circle with my developmental writing colleagues. This teaching circle sometimes referred to as the Developmental Writing Teaching Circle or the Innovation in Developmental Education Teaching Circle (to be more inclusive of other disciplines within developmental education) has provided me with many opportunities to improve my knowledge of teaching developmental literacy. For example, I have learned about common challenges teachers face in developmental literacy courses and some suggestions on how to deal with these challenges. I have learned some of the background and history to the course designs and been involved in curriculum overviews and design, including choosing textbooks and creating a syllabus for adjunct faculty. I have been introduced to important literature[[1]](#footnote-1) in the field of developmental education and through the teaching circle I came to know about the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) as well as the South Western Association for Developmental Education (SWADE). The teaching circle has also been a space to share knowledge and experiences from professional conferences. I am currently a member of SWADE and have attended and presented at SWADE conferences.

Another advantage of the teaching circle has been the chance to select books for study and discussion. These books are carefully selected and have focused on some of the major issues affecting developmental education specifically and community colleges more generally. The books have also provided useful insights into not just pedagogy, but also attitudes, mind-sets, and perennial problems within our field. I wish to highlight two books that I found particularly relevant and how I used what I learned in the classroom.

*The College Fear Factor* by Rebecca Cox

Through studying this book I gained valuable insights into student-teacher dynamics as well as a better understanding as to what motivates or discourages community college students, especially more vulnerable populations who enter developmental courses. Our aim was to discover ways in which we could facilitate more success for these students and perhaps overcome some of our own misperceptions and/or assumptions that may hinder student success.

As I reflected on this I became aware that even though I may make every effort to present myself as approachable and non-threatening to students, barriers and fears persist. Therefore, I decided to take a more direct approach to bring down some of these barriers. One strategy that seems to have helped is to hold one-on-one conferences and to invite students to meet me in my office. I have found that these informal meetings, although short, have allowed the student to (1) feel like an individual who is important (2) open up a line of communication with me and (3) has provided me with a better knowledge of individual students and their challenges.

While it is difficult to gauge the impact of reaching out to students like this in a quantifiable way, I have received written and verbal feedback that I feel accounts for some measure of success. Below are some examples:

*“I have to write for you for many reasons, one to practice my vocabulary!!( just kidding! ) I do appreciate every minute of you class. Was one those more effective money expended that I had. You not only brought peace, happiness, knowledge, inspiration, but one those more impressive for me was your acceptance and respect for each one of us. Accepting each one how we are, with our limitations and many times, "stupid little jokes". But you with description and respect show us what is right and what is wrong.”* (ESL 1050 Marta Molisani 8/7/2013)

*“Absolutely good, help every student and answer all questions with a smile in his face. very good humor and is always available in his office. DO all work , it makes a difference, and participate and get an A very nice professor.”* (Writing 0990 Rate My Professors 12/18/2013)

**Kristen Nelson**, Gordon DunneENGL-1010-101-F15

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*Dear Professor Dunne,

I just wanted to take a moment to express my appreciation for you. I feel like many of the professors don't care much about the students as individuals. However, your class was different. I'm sure it takes a lot of your personal time to go through everyone's papers and give personalized feedback. Especially when it came to my journals. I know I got carried away pretty much every time, and what should have been perhaps two pages somehow turned into ten. With that in mind, I'll try to keep this email brief.
I think it takes a special kind of person to teach. I certainly wouldn't have the patience for it. And even though I'm sure you're not the type of man to be too critical, the feedback you gave me was always helpful and/or complimentary. It's nice to have someone notice your strengths. I really appreciate the remark about using my talent in a future career, and that you mentioned National Geographic. I also enjoyed our last meeting. It was nice talking with you and sort of getting to know you as a person, even though now I probably won't ever get to see you again.
You're a kind man and I enjoyed having you as a professor. And I won't soon forget the encouragement you gave me about my writing. Thank you!

With Best Regards,
Kristen Nelson*

For me it has been encouraging to receive such feedback as it tells me that at least some students are overcoming fears and feelings of inadequacy and that they also feel they are valuable and can be successful. My goal is to ensure all of my students feel the same and I will continue to find ways to achieve this. A large part of this success of reaching out to students stems from conversations with colleagues and reading useful literature, all part of the teaching circle.

The second book I want to mention is *Back to School: Why everybody deserves a second chance at education* by Mike Rose.

What I enjoyed most about Rose’s book was how he humanizes education and sees it as much more than just a route to a job. I agree with Rose’s philosophy on education, i.e., that it is one of the principal means of transforming individuals into better people and that education is for all: children, adults, rich, and poor. Furthermore, Rose considers the value of all types of learning including developmental courses and makes an important point when he highlights how most education in America after high school takes place in remedial and occupational classrooms but these classes are the most disadvantaged in many ways. Rose’s call for better funding and appreciation for developmental and vocational courses is encouraging. I had the unique opportunity to hear from Mike Rose at the SWADE conference in 2014 and to learn a little more about some of the challenges of our profession and what we can do to defend our mission as educators, especially developmental educators.

As important as all of the above has been for me in terms of improving my teaching, I also believe what has been of great value is the opportunity to build professional relationships and foster a sense of collegiality within our discipline. I hope to continue the tradition of the teaching circle throughout my teaching career.

1. Following is a sample: “Responding to Student Writers” Nancy Sommers (2013); “Student Success in Community Colleges: A practical guide to developmental education” D. Boroch et al. (2010); “What Works: Research-based best practices in developmental education” Hunter Boylan (2002); “Improving Student Success by Strengthening Developmental Education in Community Colleges: The role of state policy” D. Price & B. Roberts (2009); “Reading and Learning Strategies: Recommendations for the 21st century” M. Simpson et al., (2004); [↑](#footnote-ref-1)