

Lynda Davis

Attitude Determines Altitude

I love a noisy classroom. I love to be interrupted. I love students jumping out of their chair, interjecting their opinions loud and strong. I love trying to “settle them down” because that means they are excited about what they have to say. If they feel that strongly about it, then they will want to make sure they convey those strong opinions with clarity. For those reasons, I give my students permission to interrupt me—to shout out in class. This kind of enthusiasm spreads and is a darn sight more interesting and thought provoking than the sedate atmosphere in an ordered classroom. The most important element of my pedagogy *is* my enthusiasm. My students know from the first day of class that I am excited to be there with them, learning from them, and in turn sharing with them my knowledge of composition and literature. For me, it is as important as the first line of the essay—I must “hook ‘em” from the start. Attitude is contagious, and I feel that if I can get them excited about their studies, they will be more receptive to my instruction and leadership. One way I get students excited is by teaching them that their voice has power.

After I introduce my syllabus at the beginning of each semester, I ask my students if they have any questions. Invariably one student will raise a hand and ask, “Can we use “I” in our papers?” The answer is an empathic “yes.” As a teacher of composition and literature, I want my students to know that their voices and opinions have rhetorical power not only in class where I welcome loud voices, but also in their class assignments, in their own lives, and in society. For instance, I enjoy emphasizing the personal voice to freshmen by assigning a personal essay that requires students to re-examine an “ah-ha” moment in their lives and to show me how that moment is extraordinary, such as the one in which a student on a long-term mission trip suddenly realizes she is an outsider. She then understood how her small moment translated into larger, world-wide meanings about crossing borders. For sophomores, I ask students to select a current debatable topic that is important to them and follow it through to the end of the semester, writing Rogerian, Exploratory, and Position argument papers, focusing on controversial topics. One student surprised me with his unique approach to the oft-argued steroids-in-sports topic. He approached the topic from his own unique experience living with a rare form of dwarfism and taking steroids from birth. As an athlete, he will never be able to compete professionally. I also encourage my literature students to analyze their own perceptions of literary themes and how they see these themes influencing society. I teach them that their argument is theirs to make, but they must prove it with sound logical and evidence.

Just as I must consciously contemplate what I believe makes good teaching for my philosophy, students must learn to think cognitively about societal issues rather than simply becoming pawns in society’s persuasive push and pull. I encourage students to question everything—even the less-obvious rhetoric found in their favorite works of literature, movies, or popular music. My students enjoy discovering their power to question the myriad of rhetorical messages they encounter every day. By equipping students with critical thinking skills, they are more confident, bold, and invested in their writing, often changing their stances after extensive research. I also teach my students that reading literature is critical because it equips them with the unique opportunity to experience extraordinary trials and adventures not normally available to them. For example, students can experience the silencing of a voice based on one’s race and gender by reading Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, or they can feel the heavy burdens soldiers carried during the Vietnam War by reading Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*. But sometimes they take a new direction, such as the military student who detected cadence (a military rhythmic

beat to keep soldiers in line) in O'Brien's fiction. Or another soldier-student who position himself as the "loaded gun" and the nation as the "owner" in Emily Dickenson's poem: "My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun / In Corners - till a Day / The Owner passed - identified / And carried Me away." I encourage students to step away from the expected and create something original and unique to them. As a result, I find students more excited to take ownership in their work and pride in doing a great job.

Most importantly, I not only ask my students to push themselves into new territory, but I also push myself. One area in which I continue to enhance my teaching skills is with new media. Today's teachers frequently find themselves learning from their students when it comes to technology. While it is not always comfortable, teachers must venture into this sometimes scary territory. To that end, I refuse to allow my some-what limited skills keep me from assigning new media projects. For example, before I assigned my first webpage project, I visited my institution's new media lab and learned how to make a website; I uploaded my new media assignment onto my newly constructed website page and required my students to visit it to obtain their instructions. Ultimately, this decision enhanced my teaching because I had "been there, done that," and I could empathize with their struggles while at the same time help them find solutions to technical difficulties. My group website project combines webpage design with a visual/rhetorical argument. In order to gain the experience of working in a group while still enjoying individuality, students cohesively decide on an advocacy topic and then design and create their homepage layout, controlling argument, and call to action, such as signing a petition. Each student then creates and argues his/her own individual page, with a mind towards group cohesion in theme and design, which links off the group homepage. I have also assigned a class-website on American Women Regionalist Writers in which students created individual and group pages linking to the class home page. Another of my new media literature assignments asked them to create and present their own translation of one of our course readings or themes into a video. As a result of their enthusiasm, students often publish their work on *YouTube*.

In addition to finding their voice and using it to "speak out," I enjoy teaching my students to re-envision "truth" and that "truth" often changes, depending on geography. Understanding the rhetorical relativity of politics and popular culture empowers students' individualism. Students who are unaware of society's rhetorical strategies are often left powerless and marginalized. Once students begin to see how influential media can be, they become excited about analyzing and assembling meanings as if they were pieces to a puzzle, and they become excited about using their voices to enter the public arena to have a say in what that final picture puzzle looks like. One particular student in my American Women Writers class wrote to me in a note the following excerpt: "The way that I look at women from this era has completely changed, and so has the way that I read and look at stories. . . . [T]he things I learned in this class will carry over into any other books I read."

Each day I walk into class with a smile on my face. I never knew how significant that was until one student wrote about it on my evaluation. Each and every semester I teach I become more and more convinced that my positive attitude towards learning affects my students' enthusiasm towards receiving an education. My attitude affects their attitude. I love to teach and my students know it.