

Julia Spicher Kasdorf

Do students learn what teachers teach? Sometimes. Maybe. (This I learned as a doctoral student in English Education.) I do know that students learn by doing. Lucky for me, the mainstays of the courses I teach in the English Department are the workshop, structured peer review seminars, and faculty tutorial. These methods suit my commitment to hold students to high standards while engaging them in real tasks.

Those who enroll in the course I most commonly teach, ENGL 213 “Introduction to Poetry Writing,” do so because they have chosen poetry. A few are poets, attuned to the way language can name feelings or snare ideas with images. The majority are public relations or supply chain majors who hope that writing poems will help them to better use words. All are eager to write, but many think that poetry is any expression of emotion, and that it should therefore be immune to critical scrutiny. The task, then, is to foster their desire to write while helping them to develop the skills, sensibility, and vocabulary of critics. There is much to master, and there are many different kinds of knowledge to gain, seemingly all at once. I divide class time evenly between workshop and guided discussions of poetics, including close readings of published poems, so students can observe the methods of experienced authors. They learn to read closely for meaning as well as method, searching for techniques they may imitate in their own writing.

They demonstrate this knowledge in the weekly workshop, where several students present new poems. As they critique the work of others, students develop and test knowledge that they will apply to their own texts. Authors learn to be both invested in and detached from their own work, a valuable life skill. Critical acumen evolves more swiftly than writing ability, so I do not stress revision at this level; new learning is best incorporated into the next poem. They compose a poem a week—which I respond to in writing—and submit one to workshop several times in the semester. They also meet in small groups for peer review, confer with me, and share drafts on ANGEL. At the end of the semester, they submit a portfolio of ten poems with multiple revisions and reflective writing describing their critical decisions, aesthetic values and writing process.

At the 400-level, students may be third- or fourth-year English majors; many have taken workshops together in the past; they are confident and fairly experienced readers of contemporary poetry. My task remains twofold: to nurture the growth of working writers, and to sustain and challenge that growth by facilitating meaningful conversations among students and between students and literature. I have become increasingly concerned with helping students to practice productive dialogue. When I first began teaching, I used to show videos of performance poets in class. I have stopped, although the resources on U-Tube keep expanding; I ask students to watch them on their own time. There can be no passive learners, only active engagement. I send them to the Palmer Museum to write about art. I design each course to include at least two poets who visit our campus. Students attend those public readings, sometimes for the first time, and typically they are delighted. In every class I teach, students memorize and recite at least two published poems they admire, and thereby they come to possess a work of art. They read carefully and listen thoughtfully, and then formulate constructive responses. In a text-messaged, sound-bitten culture that seems to offer fewer and fewer venues for sustained, thoughtful engagement and dialogue, they learn how use their words.