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Chapter 3- Improving the General Education Experience Through Equitable and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices

Cree Taylor

Utah State University, cree.taylor@usu.edu

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Chapter 3

Improving the General Education Experience Through Equitable and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices

Cree Taylor

General education courses sometimes have the reputation among students of being obstacles to overcome, wastes of time, and a squander of tuition. In my opinion, student dislike of general education courses is fueled by two factors: 1) students' misunderstanding of the purpose of general education and 2) general education instructors designing courses with a gatekeeping mentality. Traditionally, general education courses have served as the gatekeepers of the university experience by—intentionally or unintentionally—funneling out students who “don't belong” through poor course design. Racially minoritized students, women, and first-generation college students are disproportionately affected by the gatekeeping mentality of general education instructors.

In my role as a Lecturer in the English Department at Utah State University (USU), I teach first-year composition courses. At USU, these courses are *ENGL 1010* and *ENGL 2010*. According to the USU Course Catalogue, in *ENGL 1010*, “Students learn skills and strategies for becoming successful academic readers, writers, and speakers: how to read and write critically, generate and develop ideas, work through multiple drafts, collaborate with peers, and present ideas orally.” The catalogue indicates that *ENGL 2010* focuses on the “writing of reasoned academic argument supported with appropriately documented sources. Focuses on library and Internet research, evaluating and citing sources, oral presentations based on research, and collaboration.” In my current role, I teach three sections of first-year composition in the fall and two sections of first-year composition in the spring. I also teach *ENGL 2640: Race and Ethnicity in the United States*. This chapter focuses on my work in first-year composition courses because they make up most of my course load.

I also serve in an inaugural role as the Special Assistant to the Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHaSS). USU is a primarily predominantly white institution (PWI) and, as such, it is important for instructors to foster empathy for marginalized individuals as they help students navigate their university experience. In my role in the Dean's office, I focus on how to make our pedagogy and practices inherently feminist, anti-racist, and inclusive. As a reflective instructor, I apply student feedback as I incorporate anti-racist and equitable pedagogies to revamp the general education courses I teach.

First-year composition courses also have a gatekeeping reputation that has existed for over a century. There is debate among scholars about the origins of Composition Studies and composition courses (Ritter & Matsuda, 2010, p. 2), though the composition course became standardized in the United States somewhere between 1880 and 1910. Ritter and Matsuda point out that “the first-year composition course was primarily a course taught *by men for men*...[and] from a socioeconomic point of view, the larger, broader imperative in the composition course nationwide...was to produce learned *men* for deployment into professional roles in society” (p. 3). In women's colleges, composition focused on helping women “grow as teachers, or as mother-teachers...who educate their children and grow a literate family” (p. 3).

Over time, composition instruction—like other elements of the university educational experience—had to adapt to a changing demographic of students. Sharon Crowley (1998) argues that the shift in the makeup and purpose of the university helped “position first-year writing as a ‘gatekeeper’...limiting entrance to the university community to those able to pass its requirements.” As the field of Composition Studies has grown and developed, first-year writing

instructors no longer view our courses as gatekeeping courses. Composition instructors, including me, consistently reflect on our role at the university. We employ critical pedagogies to help understand students and how the curriculum can be molded and shifted into creating spaces that are more inclusive to learning. Composition instructors recognize the importance of using our course objectives to help students master specific skills while simultaneously aiding students to obtain and cultivate Habits of Mind that will contribute to their success, both inside and outside of the university.

This chapter highlights the Habits of Mind that I find especially important as I teach and mentor students in my general education courses. These habits come from the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (2011), which was developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. This framework recognizes that “the concept of ‘college readiness’ is increasingly important in discussions about students’ preparation for postsecondary education.” As such, the framework “describes the rhetorical and twenty-first-century skills as well as Habits of Mind and experiences that are critical for college success” (p. 1). These Habits of Mind are curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition.

My composition course design seeks to touch on each of these habits through readings, discussions, and writing assessments; however, I have found the habits of openness, engagement, persistence, and responsibility to be especially important to focus on as students reenter in-person education since the Covid-19 pandemic. After briefly describing the recent trend in Composition Studies, I devote one section of this chapter to each of these four Habits of Mind. In these sections, I define the habit, discuss its importance for students and instructors, and describe some of my own teaching practices that have evolved to not only help students cultivate this habit but to work to cultivate these habits in myself.

Eliminating the Gatekeeping Mentality in First-Year Composition

There has been an ongoing national conversation surrounding first-year writing courses and their role in higher education. English educators have offered criticisms of composition courses from several vantage points. In 2019, for instance, Asao Inoue, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) chair, delivered a keynote addressing the issues surrounding white language supremacy and gatekeeping in first-year composition courses. Inoue’s comments provide an entry point for interrogating the need to transform the nature and purpose of college composition.

Inoue suggests that composition instructors engage in “deep and mindful attending” to our students to help us “understand [our students] without trying to control or change them” (Inoue, 2019). Deep attending is a compassion-first model that allows instructors to have increased patience for students who are different from us, who sound differently, and who grew up in different places. Inoue provides instructors with a list of questions to think through as they work to implement structural changes in their courses that will get rid of the gatekeeping mentality and allow our courses to be spaces where all students—including minoritized students—can thrive (p. 364). Inoue’s questions, which I have slightly modified, include:

- How are instructors attending to students and to each other?
- What are the markers of compassionate attending?
- How is the instructor attending a practice of judgement that students can notice?
- How is the instructor attending a practice that recognizes student existence without overly controlling them?

Inoue's questions can get some helpful conversations started. But asking questions is not enough. Bettina L. Love (2019) argues that “persistent, structural barriers...cannot be eradicated by tweaking the system or making adjustments” (p. 11). Instead, Love contends that “Pedagogy should work in tandem with students’ own knowledges of their community...to push forward new ideas for social change” (p. 19). Gatekeeping—whether intentional or unintentional—has a deep impact on minoritized students, and structural changes are necessary to build success and confidence in students in introductory and gateway courses. According to Love, instructors must “criticize the systems that perpetuate injustice” and “work to undo these systems while working to create new ones built upon the collective vision and knowledge” of our students (p. 55). As we work to dismantle unjust systems and seek to build new ones, questions like those posed by Inoue are a great place for instructors to start as we evaluate our own teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices.

As educators seek to make general education classrooms spaces of opportunity, we need to do so by centering the student at the heart of our curricular structure. When we solicit feedback from our students, we need to take their input into careful consideration while we build new, more equitable structures into our courses. These dispositional transformations will help us meet our students’ needs for learning and growth. Habits of Mind are tools that will help students successfully navigate university instruction in the general education classroom and beyond. Focusing on developing our students’ Habits of Mind can shift the gatekeeping identity of general education courses and help students see that the university is a place where they belong.

Habits of Mind and Composition

First-year composition instructors have a huge responsibility to craft general education courses that use the course content to help prepare students for college and life while also instilling in them a confidence that the university is where they belong and can succeed. A feeling of belonging is essential when it comes to the success of minoritized students at the university level. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Adrienne Lu (2023) reminds us that “students who feel that they belong at their institutions get better grades and fare better on persistence, engagement, and mental health.” Since general education and gateway courses are often the students’ first introduction to college life, it makes sense for general education instructors to use this space to cultivate an atmosphere of belonging.

As PWIs like Utah State University seek to increase the recruitment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds, they also need to remember that “it’s one thing to admit more diverse students and another to make sure they feel welcome and valued” (Lu, 2023). One way to recraft and restructure general education classrooms, particularly through an anti-racist lens, is by centering the curriculum on skill acquisition and the development of Habits of Mind. We can help students become well-educated individuals and set them up for success in college and in life if we see our content as the vehicle instead of the destination of learning.

As instructors, it is also important to apply these Habits of Mind as we design and redesign curriculum and classroom policies. I reflected upon the questions posed by Inoue as I revised my course policies and procedures. For me, the markers of compassionate attending are flexibility, patience, understanding, and seeing students as whole people with lives beyond my classroom. This reflection led me to the concept of pedagogies of care. I wanted to incorporate classroom policies that helped my students see that I care about them and that I want them to succeed.

One of those policies centered on revision and extensions on assignments. Assessment extensions were built into every assignment, and students were encouraged to revise every assignment until they mastered course concepts. At the end of the semester, students reflected on

their interaction with these new, more caring classroom policies in a survey. Students were asked, Would you recommend that students take this course from this instructor? They wrote, “Cree taught in a way that you felt comfortable asking questions or making comments.” “She set up the class so you will succeed if you put in the work. She is easy to reach out to with any questions.” “I feel like she really wants me to succeed as a writer and a person...she seemed like she actually cared about her students.” “Cree cares about you and your growth.” These responses helped me better understand the importance of attending to students and working to modify classroom structures in ways that increase a sense of belonging and motivates students to learn. By fostering Habits of Mind, I can focus on who students are becoming through what they are learning, and students felt valued and heard in the classroom.

When instructors focus on who they are helping students become with input from the students they are teaching, instructors recognize which outcomes of education are most important and helpful to student success. Focusing on helping students cultivate Habits of Mind will lead to a more successful outcome for both instructors and students and will help us better retain students, especially our minoritized students, from their first semester to their second. By prioritizing Habits of Mind, we can also “encourage [students] to be active participants in their world...[and] instill a sense of power in young people by teaching them to critically analyze their world and articulate their own beliefs” (Love, 2019, p. 66). This is truly why we teach in the first place, right?

Openness

The Framework (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011) defines openness as “the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world” (p. 4). This corresponds to the Habit of Mind of listening with understanding and empathy. For students, openness looks like being willing to listen to and understand the perspectives of others. It can also help students recognize situations where their opinion might need to move or shift when presented with additional information. Openness requires a certain level of vulnerability because it requires students to hear things that might lead to uncomfortable conversations. Developing openness allows students to engage in conversations and interact with topics in meaningful and enriching ways.

One way to help students develop openness is through course readings. During the first week of the semester in my composition courses, students are introduced to what it means to read like an academic. Our textbook, *From Inquiry to Academic Writing* (Green & Lidinsky, 2021), describes academic reading in this way:

Good academic writers are also good critical readers: They leave their mark on what they read, identifying issues, making judgements about the truth or what writers tell them, and evaluating the adequacy of the evidence in support of an argument. (p. 49–50)

While critical reading is important, I believe that before students can critically analyze a text, they need to understand it. Critical reading is the first step in gaining the understanding required to move to a higher category of thinking in Bloom’s Taxonomy; from simply gaining knowledge to pushing deeper into understanding that knowledge—the perspective of who generated it and the impact of that knowledge on folks that may be different from them.

Rhetorical listening, a skill and term coined by Krista Ratcliffe (2005), is one way to help students practice openness when reading a text. Often, students are trained to read a text to respond to it before they fully understand the author’s point of view. Ratcliffe argues that “listening has been neglected” in the composition classroom, and it needs to be taught as a rhetorical strategy (p. 196). She looks at rhetorical listening as a way to foster a deep reading of texts. “Just as all texts can be read,” Ratcliffe writes, “so too can all texts be listened to” (p. 203).

When students rhetorically listen to a text, they “avail [them]selves with more possibilities for inventing arguments that bring differences together, for hearing differences as harmony or even as discordant notes” (p. 204). Rhetorical listening is a step in the deep reading process that allows students to use their agency to understand a text and the author’s argument and point of view before responding to it.

Early in the semester, I expose students to readings that confront controversial topics head-on. Students can be resistant to the perspectives at first. I use reading responses as a way for students to document the experience of rhetorically listening to these texts. We discuss their experience reading before we talk about the arguments being made and the rhetorical strategies the authors employ. I point out that before we can adequately analyze arguments being made, we need to do our best to fully understand those arguments.

First, students pay attention to how the topics in these texts make them feel as they read. I want students to acknowledge what is happening in their bodies and minds as they read. I also want students to think about why they are having these reactions to the text. Ratcliffe calls this promoting an “*understanding* of self and other that informs our culture’s politics and ethics” (p. 204). If reading about how Christine Mitchell (2022) describes the disabled person’s perspective on masking makes students feel uncomfortable, I ask them to think about why this discomfort exists. What about their background and/or upbringing might influence how they feel about what Mitchell is writing? They also consider the author’s perspective. What about the author’s background and experience might make them see and write about this topic in this particular way? This affective line of questioning helps students “proceed from within a *responsibility* logic, not from a defensive guilt/blame one” (Ratcliffe, 1999, p. 204). They can take responsibility for their point of view, understand the point of view of the author, and choose to keep reading anyway with an attitude of openness.

Next, I encourage students to pay careful attention to what parts of the reading stick out to them and why. What about their background draws them to this part of the reading? Here I ask students to practice another Habit of Mind, applying past knowledge to new situations. These could be parts they wholeheartedly agree with and parts that they disagree with completely. When Claudia Rankine (2015) describes the constant state of mourning of Black folks in America, she invokes the sadness of the Black mother. Usually, this conversation about mothers sticks out to students. I ask them why, and they point out that everyone has a mother or a mother figure in their lives. They can understand a mother’s love, and they can empathize with a mother’s sadness, even if they do not fully understand or agree with the reason for that sadness. Identifying “discursive spaces of both *commonalities* and *differences*” (Ratcliffe, 1999, p. 204) allows for understanding and reflection. Students can take a step back from the reading to help them better understand the perspective before responding with whether they agree with that perspective. I want students to “accentuate commonalities and differences not only in the *claims* [of the text], but also in the *cultural logics* within which those claims function” (p. 204). Again, the goal here is for students to seek to understand before being understood and to help them foster the habit of openness.

I then ask students to reflect upon their experience listening to the text and to describe what they learned about the topic and the author’s perspective as it relates to their argument about the topic. I have found that having students rhetorically listen to a text before responding deepens their engagement and understanding of the text and the author’s perspective. This, in turn, helps students grapple with the content from a more critical, more informed, more open position. This method also helps maintain a civil classroom atmosphere during discussions. As a class, we can move past debating topics and focus on the merits of the arguments being made by the authors. I emphasize that an argument can be well constructed even if they disagree with the

view of the author. Starting the semester with rhetorical listening and fostering the habit of openness helps set the tone for the rest of the term.

One other way I practice openness in my classroom is by encouraging students to look at topics through multiple perspectives and alternative views. This includes researching topics through the eyes of multiply marginalized and/or underrepresented (MMU) scholars (Walton et al., 2019). We talk about implicit bias as a class and discuss ways students can account for bias—their own and the bias of what they are reading—in the research and writing processes. To help students consider their research topics from a variety of angles, I use a multiple-perspectives table that asks them to research their topic from a variety of perspectives and points of view. I strongly encourage students to look at the perspectives of the traditionally marginalized to see how their topic impacts those communities before they finalize the arguments they want to make about that topic. Students are invited to select perspectives from the table below and then conduct research into how individuals with these identity vectors might experience their topic in different ways.

Table 3.1

Table of Identifying Vectors to Consider when Examining Multiple Perspectives With Students

Perspective	Examples
Race/Ethnicity	Native American, African American/Black, Asian American, Latino/a/x, white, etc.
Gender	Woman, Man, Transgender, Cisgender, Nonbinary
Class	Rich, Middle-Class, Poor
(Dis)ability	Learning, Hearing, Visual, Mental, Physical, Able-Bodied, etc.
Sexuality	Straight, Gay, Bisexual, etc.
Religion	Christian, Muslim, Jewish, nonreligious, etc.
Education	High School Diploma, Undergraduate degree, Graduate degree, Technical Schools, type of degree earned, etc.
Age	Young, Old, Middle Age, Children, Teenagers, Young Adults
Political Views	Liberal, Moderate, Conservative, Left, Middle, Right, Democrat, Republican, Independent
Nationality	Country of Origin
Citizenship	Immigrant, Citizen, non-Citizen, First-Generation, DACA etc.
Body	Weight, Height, Shape, Size, etc.

A student researching social media’s impact on young people, for example, might focus initially on how social media impacts the body image of young, white, cis-female folks. The perspective of this group is important to the topic; however, this group is not the only group affected by social media and body image. Students use this table to help expand their research to include racial minorities, gender diverse folx, and body diverse individuals (Saguey & Ward, 2011; Royce 2016). They answer questions like: Does this source represent the voice of an MMU individual? How does my topic impact individuals from these groups (positively, negatively, not at all)? Should I consider the needs of this group in my argument? Why or why

not? As they research, students are given the agency to choose if they want to interact more closely with these perspectives and decide how they want to discuss those perspectives in their writing. In addition to putting students at the center of the learning process as active participants, studying a topic through multiple perspectives helps students continue to foster the habit of openness.

Students quickly realize the nuance and complexities of beauty and body standards and their research can explore that complexity through all these perspectives. The assignment also has them reflect on their experience: Does my topic affect individuals from an intersecting perspective in a unique way (e.g., disabled, Black men; trans teenagers; etc.)? What did I learn about how my topic affects marginalized and/or underrepresented communities differently than mainstream individuals? What impact does this research have on my overall argument? How can I better consider these perspectives moving forward with my research and argument? This assignment helps students foster openness because it invites them to “listen to and reflect on the ideas and responses of others” (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011, p. 4) while drawing conclusions from their research.

After completing this assignment, one student wrote: “This research has alerted me to some of the nuances of the issue...I hadn’t considered all of the different discrimination layers that should be considered before trying to draw an overall blanket conclusion.” Another student reflected: “The [different] perspectives have also led to further research into why certain conditions exist and how they’ve affected those not in power. Moving forward, I need to make sure that I conduct deep readings of the sources I choose so that I can really do the perspectives the justice they deserve.” Overall, this assignment helps students become more open to the perspectives and experiences of others and they continue to explore their research topics and zero in on an overall argument for their research paper.

There are other ways to foster openness in the classroom. This includes encouraging students to draw upon their lived experiences and to value the lived experiences of others (Collins, 2000) as they grapple with course concepts. Instructors might also employ an engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) that emphasizes dialogue and participation in brave environments where students feel uplifted and empowered to speak and participate in meaningful ways. What is important to remember is that if instructors want students to develop the habit of openness, we need to model it for them. bell hooks (1994) writes, “Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (p. 22). hooks encourages instructors to take the first risk and to share in ways they expect and hope for their students to share. “Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students,” writes hooks. “Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (p. 21). Likewise, developing the habit of openness is necessary for both students and instructors if the general education classroom is a space for building success and confidence.

Engagement

The habit of engagement is described as “a sense of investment and involvement in learning” (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011, p. 4). Sanders (2018) would call this “becom[ing] a learner” (p. 5). Instructors can foster engagement by encouraging students to “make connections between their own ideas and others,” to participate in meaning making (Cohn, 2021, p. 135), and to act upon what they learn (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011, p.4). We must create opportunities for students to become invested in their own learning rather than performing learning for the sake of a grade.

hooks (1994) offers instructors one suggestion for how to make this happen. She states that we should enter the classroom “with the conviction that it [is] crucial for [instructors] and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer” (p. 14). As instructors, we need to call upon students to be active participants in the learning process that considers them holistic human beings “with complex lives and experiences.” These aspects of our students’ lives can and should be shared, valued, appreciated, and included in the canon of knowledge embedded in course content (p. 15). This might mean instructors viewing ourselves as learners also. Perhaps reimagining the instructor role as discussion leader would be helpful here. In the practical sense, this could be realized through student-to-student and student-to-instructor dialogues, emphasizing the importance of small group work and discussion, selecting course readings that help students develop nuanced thinking, providing students with choices, and supplying students with ample peer and instructor feedback throughout the learning process.

To help students engage with their readings, I draw upon the wisdom of Jenae Cohn (2021). Cohn writes that we need to “take [students’] *learning needs* into consideration” when assigning course readings, especially in digital spaces (p. 11). She encourages us to design activities that help students curate, connect, create, and contextualize course readings (p. 131–134).

In my courses, students draft their reading responses and then bring a hard copy with them to our in-person meeting. They use those responses to work with their peers to better understand the course concepts and to develop questions about the concepts that they can pose to the rest of the class. When one student shares knowledge that I think would benefit the rest of the class, I invite them to share their thoughts in the large group conversations. Every time a student responds, I connect that response to the reading, or to my thoughts, or to something another student said. If viewpoints need to be addressed, I address them. Otherwise, I let students actively participate in the course and operate from the shared knowledges of the group.

Students recognize when instructors value their contributions to the learning environment. In my experience, emphasizing the role of students as active participants and contributors to the course content not only helps contribute to overall student engagement, but it makes the classroom a space where students feel free to share their insights and opinions. One student comment on a semester survey helps summarize most students’ experience with this level of engagement: “Cree really cares about her students and what they have to say. I didn’t feel like just another student, but someone who had valid thoughts and ways to express them.” Helping students recognize the importance of the knowledges they bring to the classroom increases their ownership of the course content and motivates them to stay engaged in the learning process.

Often, I let student comments stand as the last word on a topic or concept. I do not need to be the authority on everything. My goal is to help students make connections between course content and the outside world. hooks writes that students “rightfully expect that [instructors] will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (1994, p. 19). If we can make the skills students are learning in gateway courses feel valuable to them both inside and outside of the classroom—by connecting the content and skills to their lived experiences—they will be able to develop the habit of engagement.

Persistence

Another Habit of Mind the framework addresses is persistence, which is “the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short-and long-term projects” (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011, p. 5). We can think about this as the development of time

management skills that will help students “commit to exploring...a topic, idea, or demanding task” and then finish that task (p. 5). As instructors, we need to design classroom spaces that encourage students to persist through difficult curricular demands. One way to encourage persistence is to employ some form of ungrading in the classroom.

We need to recognize that ungrading is a spectrum, and just like other pedagogical practices, ungrading looks different for each instructor. On one end of the ungrading spectrum, instructors remove the letter grade entirely from the course. At institutions where instructors are required to assign students grades, these instructors meet individually with students to discuss their coursework and then have the student select the grade they think they deserve. Some instructors choose to implement more low-stakes assignments that do not impact the student’s overall grade while they are still working on mastering course concepts. Other instructors refrain from any type of grading until the final assessment of the course. “Unfortunately, in most classrooms teachers penalize students for mistakes they make *during* the learning process” (Feldman, 2019, p. 30). The main goal of ungrading is to shift the students’ focus from getting an A to mastering course objectives and valuing the learning experience. All along the way, instructors who employ ungrading practices meet frequently with students to gauge their progress, offer copious amounts of feedback, and allow students to revise their work as many times as it takes for them to indicate that they are mastering the course objectives.

I submit that adopting some form of ungrading into the classroom helps students develop persistence. Traditional grading “stifles risk-taking and trust between the teacher and student...and demotivates and disempowers students” (Feldman, 2019, p. 28). If we want students to take charge of their education; to “grapple with challenging ideas, texts, processes, or projects”; to complete those projects; and to “consistently take advantage of opportunities to improve and refine their work” (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011, p. 5), the fear of being penalized for doing so by getting a bad grade is enough to stop them. Ungrading is a way to help students persist through trying, failing, receiving feedback, and trying again until they master the skill or objective in an environment conducive to learning.

In my classroom, ungrading looks like flexible deadlines, weekly formative assessments and feedback, intense scaffolding, and opportunities for revision. My ungrading philosophy prioritizes peer and instructor feedback, revision, and reflection. Like Chiaravalli (2020), students in my classroom “evaluate their own and other students’ work, make improvements in response to feedback from their [instructor] and peers, and elicit and receive new feedback” (Blum, 2020, p. 84). I will share a few of my policies and practices below.

Every writing assignment is scaffolded with writing process assignments (WPA) that are due almost weekly throughout the term. Each WPA is a formative assessment that takes students through a phase of the writing process as they work toward drafting the writing assignment as a summative assessment. Students who submit their WPA on the due date are guaranteed instructor feedback on their work. They can take that feedback and use it as they continue through the writing process. After the deadline passes, students have one additional week to submit their work. These assignments are given a “Complete” or “Incomplete” based on whether students accomplish the WPA objectives. Students who receive an “Incomplete” can revise their work according to my feedback up to two weeks after the due date to get a “Complete.”

WPAs are “academic practice”—tools for learning that help students practice skills before drafting their essays (Feldman, 2019, p. 138–139). I do not want students to see a missed due date as a reason not to complete a WPA and participate in the learning process. Doing the assignment is beneficial to their learning, and I want to give them ample opportunity to complete the work. In addition to helping students persist through the course, this method also teaches students important metacognition skills. By allowing them to revise, I am asking them to reflect

on the learning process more meaningfully, to recognize their limitations, and to consider how to grow their thoughts, work, and engagement with the material.

Before submitting their essays to me, students participate in structured peer review. In groups of three, students critically read through and comment on each other's work. They also take their essays to the Writing Center, where they meet with a peer tutor. After making revisions based on the feedback from these three peers, students submit their essays to me for feedback. I review essays against a rubric and provide feedback and a feedback score. Students then participate in an in-class writing prompt where they look at their instructor essay feedback and reflect on the next steps. This metacognitive practice promotes persistence by helping students think critically about their learning goals and make concrete plans to achieve them. I pose questions like: What did you do particularly well in this essay? What are areas for improvement? If you were going to revise this essay, what are three revisionary changes you could make to improve your demonstration of your mastery of the course content? If you are not planning on revising this essay, what can you focus on as you look forward to our next writing project? Students are also given space to revise the essay if they would like to.

I try to employ equitable grading practices in my classroom that give each student the opportunity to succeed. My system is not for every instructor or content area. It is not perfect, and I am constantly making changes. But I have found that this method increases student persistence in my classroom. I encourage instructors to see how their grading philosophy might be hindering students' ability to cultivate persistence in their courses.

Responsibility

Responsibility is “the ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others” (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011, p. 5). Responsible students take ownership of their learning, act on what they have learned, and give credit to others where credit is due. Sanders (2018) challenges students to take responsibility for their own educational experience by “focusing on what [they] are becoming as a result of [their] education” (p. 48). He wants college students to understand that they can take full advantage of their education by claiming responsibility for the outcomes. If they can view education as an opportunity to develop Habits of Mind that will bring them success beyond college, they will have a much more enriching university experience.

Responsibility is best cultivated through student choice. Katopodis and Davidson argue that “students *need* to practice and exercise autonomy in higher education before they enter a significantly less structured world outside of the academy” (Blum, 2020, p. 106). When students feel ownership of their learning and education, they are more likely to act responsibly. As with everything in teaching, cultivating student choice looks different for every instructor. It is important to give “students the space they need to explore in order to discover what is meaningful and valuable to them” (Blum, 2020, p. 86). I believe that giving students the “freedom to choose their own learning goals” should take place within the structure of course outcomes and objectives. Each class has a list of topics and/or critical skills that students need to master before leaving. Composition instructors at USU use the outcomes of rhetorical awareness, critical thinking, information literacy, and composing processes as they build their curriculum. I use these outcomes to frame my selection of course readings, discussion topics, and content. Students can use these outcomes to help set learning goals for themselves. They can think critically about where they are in mastering these outcomes and then set individualized goals for where they would like to be at the middle and end of the term. As their instructor, I keep these goals in mind as I offer feedback and work with them to be successful in the course.

In my classroom, student choice is structured and scaffolded. For our first writing unit, I provide three texts for students to analyze and then students select which one they want to focus on for their first paper. During the second writing unit, students select whichever writing topic they want. We work together to develop a nuanced research question that allows them to use research to formulate an argument about that topic. This topic can be personal to them or have a wider social impact. In our last writing unit, students select a community they want to observe, the argument they want to make about the way that community uses rhetoric, and the genre of writing they would like to use to demonstrate what they learned about argument and rhetoric by observing that community.

When students have a choice in what they are learning, they tend to take greater personal responsibility for mastering course objectives. On feedback surveys, students consistently share that they appreciate how much choice they have in their learning. When they select research topics they are interested in, students are more invested in conducting sound research and crafting meaningful arguments based upon what they learn. As instructors, we can reflect on the purpose of our major and minor assignments to see what purpose they really serve in helping students achieve course objectives. If there is space for more student choice, instructors can build that into the course to help foster intrinsic motivation within their students. Sometimes instructors in general education underestimate the capacity of their students to make sound decisions when it comes to demonstrating their learning. The goal is to have students who are invested in mastering the course concepts and who gain a level of satisfaction upon successfully meeting their learning goals. To do this, students need to feel a level of responsibility for their own learning. Instructors do not bestow grades upon students; rather, students earn their grade by taking responsibility for their education and developing Habits of Mind that will increase their capacity to become a learner as they embark on the rest of their university education.

Conclusion

General education and gateway courses are important because they are often our students' first interaction with college. Traditionally, these courses have served as gatekeepers of the university experience by funneling out traditionally marginalized students. To make these classroom spaces more inclusive, we need to participate in deep attending that centers student voices as we make practical pedagogical changes that can better support all students as they seek a university education.

As we endeavor to make our general education classrooms spaces of opportunity, we need to do so with input from our students and with an eye toward changing the structure of our classroom to better meet student needs for learning and growth. By centering our teaching and curricular practices on helping these students cultivate Habits of Mind in supportive environments, we help them see college as a place where they belong and can experience success. Students and instructors can cultivate habits of openness, engagement, persistence, and responsibility as we work to build success and confidence in all our students—religious, racial, and ethnic minorities, disabled students, LGBTQIA+ students, first-generation college students, students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and international students included.

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