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Journal 1—“If I’d Known Twelve Things” by Alister Cumming

This article is Cumming’s reflection on his own teaching experience, what he thought in the beginning and what he has learned since. I think his main purpose for writing this article is to share his experience with those less experienced and to shed light on some practices that questions now which people may not realize. I related to this article because of my own experience teaching ESL 015: being thrown into it, not knowing what to do or think, learning from my mistakes and misinformed ideas.

Cummings and I share similar beliefs and goals in teaching, so I found that the six principles he has come to believe in apply to my own teaching and serve as great reminders for me. His first idea that writing tasks should be relevant for students is a good point, but may not be realistic for all classrooms as teachers often have curriculum to follow and books chosen for them (which was my experience). Although I could not choose my own book which to pull text from for class, I allowed my students to choose articles and topics they liked from the book. I think this point is perhaps idealistic, but a good reminder to work with what we have available and make it as relevant for our students as possible.

I think that Cummings’ second point to promote contact with members of the academic community is a brilliant way to make students feel more comfortable in a new school in a new culture and help give them more confidence speaking to their teachers and classmates. I also feel that having an electronic native-English speaking pen-pal would have greatly benefited my ESL 015 students—wish I would have thought of it! His last four points are obvious to me and I agree whole-hearted and try to follow them myself. After teaching, I know that I need to work on giving students clearly-defined ways to improve their writing (5th point) and not giving too much negative feedback.

After teaching writing for a semester, I can say that I agree with Cumming’s six practices that he now questions. Most are obvious to me, but I want to reflect on two of these points. His first point is that writing is not an easy process and takes time to develop; each writer develops in his or her own way at his or her own speed. This is one of the challenges of having a writing class for only one semester, after which students should ideally be ready for college-level writing in their other courses. As I mentioned above, something I need to work on as a teacher is when to stop leaving feedback (4th point). I learned the hard way that giving too much error correction can hinder growth and development by discouraging students and in hindsight, regret giving all the feedback I gave. I was never educated in how to give feedback or error correction, despite having a BA in TESOL and being a second year TESL MA student, which is unfortunate because it is extremely important for both the teacher and students.