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Final Course Reflection

Before taking this course, I saw academic writing in a very static, structured, and rigid way. I felt that the students should learn the rules to writing academic discourse and then they would be successful in school. I am ashamed to say that it is with this mindset that I taught ESL writing last Fall semester. Unfortunately, I never took into account how confusing it may be to learn the cultural values behind using the conventions of academic writing. One of the most important things I learned in this class is that different cultures have different ideas as to what constitutes “academic writing.” These could be word choice changes (like using “we” instead of “I”) or structural/organizational changes. The point is that when one grows up with one way of writing, it would understandably be difficult to learn another one, especially when no one explicitly explains these differences or even points out that there *are* differences.

Because of these cultural differences in rhetoric, it can be difficult to express oneself in writing in a second language. Although many of my former students expressed that academic writing constrained their identity, I never made it clear that one can write in academic discourse and retain their writing style. I learned how important it is to explore other genres of writing and allow students to develop their own personal writing style. Academic writing is not just supposed to be a spewing of facts in an impersonal, structuralized way, it is just one genre of expressing oneself in writing. Students need to learn how to incorporate their writing identity into academic writing rather than just follow meaningless patterns.

We spent some time in this course exploring if and how reading influences writing. I learned that reading allows students to see a model of how they can write and the conventions of specific genres. I focused on writing in this class so much that there was very little reading. This was partially due to time restraints, but also due to me not recognizing the value that reading can have on writing. If I could teach this class again, I would add more reading in a variety of genres.

Learning about feedback was probably the most beneficial part of this course because I have never studied it before, despite having a BA in TESOL. In my ESL writing course, I would spend approximately one hour grading and leaving feedback on *each* student’s paper—with 36 students, that was a lot of work. I knew that I may have be overwhelming some students with all the feedback, but I did not know how else to leave feedback. It felt extremely frustrated when students would make the same mistakes over in a new paper even though I had left them feedback previously; I was not sure whether my feedback was too difficult to understand, or if they just did not read it. Thanks to this course, I learned that my feedback was indeed overwhelming both my students and me, and I also learned some new techniques for leaving feedback from the readings and classmates: one way is to ask students when they turn in a paper whether they want to make their paper a draft and receive feedback for revision, or if they would rather it just be graded. This technique would ensure that I am only leaving feedback for those who want it.

I taught ESL writing in the Fall semester and took this course in the following Spring semester. At first, this seemed backwards to me and, initially, I wished that I had taken this course *before* teaching, rather than after; however, I feel that one of the reasons this class was so significant for me is because it came *after* teaching ESL writing. It is a common belief that people learn best from experience and making mistakes. Based on my experience, I believe this to be true, and although it has been difficult to uncover all the mistakes I made, I am confident that I am an exponentially better ESL writing teacher now!