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Backwards by Design Retreat and Teaching Mini-Assessment

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At the Backwards by Design (BbD) retreat last fall for every topic and assignment, I focused on a class I was about to teach the coming fall that is a core class at Fairhaven college. Every student entering Fairhaven, whether a student in their first year of college or a transfer student from main campus or another college or university, must take this class in the first quarter as a Fairhaven student. The class is 201: Critical and Reflective Inquiry. At Fairhaven, professors are encouraged to select a content area of their choosing – as the focus in the class is on writing and it is felt that this focus can be taught along with, or integrated with, any content area. I chose to focus on this class for the retreat, and resulting changes in my teaching, since the class is about writing and I feel a particular pressure to prepare new Fairhaven students for the writing-intensive classes they will be engaging in for the remainder of their college experience. I have, and still do, feel a tension in teaching this class between the focus on content and the focus on teaching writing; therefore, at the BbD retreat I struggled with this tension. In particular, I struggled in identifying a threshold concept to latch on to – should it be a content threshold concept (health as pervasive) or a writing threshold concept (writing research papers is an act of creatively joining a scholarly conversation). In the end, I focused more on the writing threshold concept and the majority of assignments revolved around writing practice – with a particular emphasis on writing research papers.

There were many topics covered at the BbD retreat that heavily influenced my thoughts about teaching writing, and they are concepts I still mull over and ponder how I can best incorporate these aspects into my teaching. One that was particularly impactful at the retreat was a number of readings and discussions we had about reviewing student work. We read about a professor's experience teaching writing – and her emphasis on communicating areas for revision with students and how she focused less on the edits. She also gave examples of how impactful various ways of giving feedback were for students. She strongly recommended that teachers always read through the entire written piece first – before giving any feedback on the document. She also suggested that the feedback we give be very detailed with the reason for the issue noted and suggestions for revisions. As a result of exposure to this style of reading student papers – I changed how I reviewed student written work in the 201 class, and in every other class I have had since, too (and for a Fairhaven professor, that means in every class and with many students via advising!). I now always read the paper completely through before making any comments on the paper. What I have noticed from this change is that I am able to give feedback that is most useful to the student – the larger, over-arching comments about the organization, content, flow, etc., as opposed to a focus on the edits. I am also able to give comments early on in the paper with the background of knowing the entire paper – so I can refer to other sections within my feedback, to show connections to the students between issues identified. I still note edits when I see them – but I am also less likely to show the student the edit from a correction as opposed to pointing out the issue that I noticed. As a result of my global commentary on the student's writing, I have noticed that students are better able to understand my feedback, and therefore, respond to it via revising their papers as a result of the feedback – sometimes in a minimal matter and other times in ways that really shock me in the level of improvement in the writing from the first draft to the final draft.

Another related topic we covered at the BbD retreat was classmate review of written work. Other Fairhaven professors use this technique often in their classes, and I was always intrigued by the idea but had not regularly put it into practice – mainly due to the lack of pre-planning for it when drafting the class schedule or running out of time within the term. After the BbD retreat I was purposeful in including this aspect in the 201 course. The few times I have incorporated classmate review of other papers in other classes I have been disappointed in the feedback classmates give to each other – I have noticed that students often give each other really positive feedback that doesn't actually help them to write better papers. In the 201 class I thought if I could model how helpful and powerful peer review can be – instead of just using words to emphasize it – than students might be better able to go in that space that feels uncomfortable and really be critical, yet supportive, of what they are reading. To do this, I shared with the class via the projector one of the manuscripts I was currently working on. I shared a recent draft that I had received back from my co-authors showing their edits and comments on the paper. We didn't go through all of the edits and comments, but I did highlight the main ideas from a few to show the class how helpful those comments were to me when revising the paper. The students were clearly very impacted by seeing this example – during the class, and through the work they did for their classmates when reviewing their papers. I have never had such success before with a classmate review assignment as I did this past fall with the 201 class. The students received feedback from their classmates and me at the same time. Many noted the similarities in the feedback between the two sources. As a result of these reinforcing messages from different audiences, the students were even more receptive to the feedback and clearly spent time wrestling with the feedback and how to improve their writing. As a result, the improvement from first to final draft for all students in this class was truly extraordinary.

Due to the success of this experience in my fall 201 class, I plan to continue to incorporate these techniques in my teaching – in all classes. As noted already above, the way I read, review, and comment on student writing has changed for me in all courses. I also plan to continue to emphasize the importance of classmate review of written work in future classes. I have to admit, that it is time consuming and so with content heavy classes I have neglected to do so since the fall. I need to incorporate the assignment and plans during the planning of the course or else we run out of time to do so. Additionally, I need to make sure there is enough time in the teaching of the course for this important element, but I am eager to continue to work on making this a regular aspect of all of my classes in the future as I strongly believe in it and I have witnessed how by incorporating a few changes in my delivery – how impactful it can be for the students.