Kathryn Robinson Huff

Developing *Writers' Block*:
A Neighborly Philosophy for Teaching College Composition & Literature in Face-to-Face and Online Learning Environments

I *want* my composition and literature students to have writers' block. That's right, plural possessive, not singular, not the kind of block that first springs to mind. I want them to live every moment of their lives in a perpetual state of writers' block, where every student has equal opportunity to learn from other writers and has mastered the skills to read, write, and communicate effectively with fully engaged, vital voices in their neighborhoods, families, social circles, churches, schools, workplaces, political spheres, and personal moments of reflection. I want my students to see writing and reading as a powerful act of community that is open to all, an investment in an ongoing communal conversation, a commitment to a conversation of diverse voices in which each voice brings essential unique perspectives to the conversation and deserves equal respect and consideration. This is not my empty ideal; this is my fleshed-out teaching philosophy.

Yes, I am a zealot. I have to be. I teach students in first-year composition and literature GE courses, courses that students sign up for not because they are eager to read and write but because they are eager to check off the requirement and be done with reading and writing. At this point, my students don't see themselves (yet) as vital members of a living, breathing community, and they too often fail to see what relevance writing and reading have to do with "real life." So, my teaching philosophy and instructional design is tactical, rhetorical, and universal—to persuade, to win over, to impart the vision that I see: that every voice (written, spoken, texted, or Instagramed) matters, and that the future is shaped by the community's response.

To move my student writers from novice to expert, I must first help them get over the other kind of block, the one with the power to shut down an individual's voice— the dreaded singular, isolating writer's block. What student writer hasn't suffered writer's block? And what student reader hasn't at least occasionally felt excluded from and confounded by the party of voices atwitter in a text or a classroom? Both situations often present themselves in my first-year composition and literature courses, and the skills required of my student writer/readers can seem inaccessible and unattainable. For too many students, the temptation to shut up, disengage, or quit may quash any personal resolve to the contrary. I get this. I have experienced both writer's and reader's block myself. But whether a writer is faced with the problem presented by a blank page (and perhaps an attendant blank mind) or a reader is faced with the problem of analyzing a dense text full of complex ideas, pedagogical solutions abound that can unblock, equip, engage, and empower even the most blocked writer. This is where I come in.

To deconstruct writer's block and construct in its place a thriving writers' block, I intentionally design a universal, inclusive, accessible, collaborative learning environment that embraces learners of multiple learning styles, cultures, lanuages, objectives, and experiences. To begin, I assess the learning needs of my students, many of whom may be multilingual learners. In the community colleges and universities where I have taught (most of them Hispanic serving institutions), I have worked with many learners whose first language was not English or who were the first in their family to attend college. My certification in Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language has given me the training and sensitivity to address their unique needs. Some of my students may be non-traditional older adult learners. For example, students in the adult degree

completion program and in the RN-to-BSN programs at the community colleges face particular challenges—balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities. My certification in Teaching Adult Learners has prepared me well for teaching this demographic. My students have come from privileged, disadvantaged, underserved, or marginalized populations. These students add a wealth of perspectives that enrich the ongoing conversation in our learning community. Some students live with a disability and benefit from accomodations that help them achieve their learning goals. To meet their needs, I work with campus instructional technologies and centers for teaching and learning to ensure ADA compliance in my online and in-class materials and teaching strategies. Once I've assessed my learners' needs and designed a curriculum that supports those needs, we dive into learning.

In the learning community of our writers' block, we celebrate every "aha" moment that moves a writer closer to their goals and course learning outcomes. In this neighborhood, we love to hang out with each other: ideas spark new ideas, conversation, excitement, encouragement, curiosity, and discovery. Writers' voices—listen—such a joyous noise.

Teaching in the Composition Classroom

From the very start, my teaching philosophy is at the forefront of instruction. For example, on the first day of a composition course, I have my novice writers spend a few moments writing a one-minute paper (or drawing a concept map) in which they describe one specific personal experience with reading or writing (this could be in relation to an event or a person, positive or negative), and one concept or skill they want to learn in the course. My writers are on equal footing, experts in their own stories, and this activity gives the students time to reflect on their knowledge, skills, and abilities in a way that makes sense to them and to clarify for themselves their learning goals. The activity also gives them a creative writing space that encourages critical thinking in a venue that is not formally evaluated but is rather a formative process of their learning. They are the experts here. Once they have written (or drawn), they pair up with a partner and exchange their ideas. I love this part. It's a noisy classroom. They are talking to each other in their first act of civic discourse. They are heard. They are happy. They are civil. They are empowered. From there, we join in a whole-class discussion—often sharing ideas visually in a shared Google doc, a classroom blackboard or whiteboard, or an online discussion board in our learning management system—and already the sense of a caring, cooperative learning community is palpable. We sense the power in our collective verbal engine.

As my learners move on toward more formal evaluative writing tasks such as formal essays, research projects, and writing portfolios, students continue their process of discovery by learning how to refine their writing decisions—honing the rhetorical nuances of word choice, sentence style, claims, organization, evidence—and finesse, as Gerald Graff and Kathy Birkenstein have noted, the "moves that matter in academic writing." My students transform into investigative journalists, learning how to use library technologies and resources, locating and critically reading scholarly secondary sources, actively listening to, evaluating, and synthesizing what experts in the field have to say on a given problem or issue. We don't stop there. My students then add their own primary research to the conversation. They design and conduct interviews and surveys—going out into the community, engaging in conversations, asking questions, listening, thinking of solutions, innovating. They begin to see where their work belongs in the broader context. They begin to conceive of themselves as problem solvers and positive agents of change.

Teaching in the Literature Classroom

In my literature courses, the learning outcomes may differ from the composition course, but my philosophy of inclusion and civic engagement remain the same. In my contemporary writers course, for instance, students are surprised to learn that we have *living* poets and novelists who are writing about important social concerns and who are having a significant impact on today's culture. Students are further surprised to learn that they can actually write to these writers and engage them in dialogue. My syllabus reflects a wonderfully diverse canon of voices from different cultures and backgrounds, and most of the writers have active social media accounts where students can privately (or publicly) message the writer. A typical project may include a flipped-classroom lesson where, for example, on their own time before class, students log into our course learning management system and click on the assignment links to watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Tedtalk "The Power of One Story," read her short story "Miracle," and complete a reading graphic organizer in which they pull out key terms, make observations, or ask questions about the text. They then come to class to work in small groups to share each other's discoveries, draw a group concept map of the story, and share findings with the class. Finally, after class, they have the option to write to Ngozi and send her a creative piece of their own in response to what they've read or a personal note of reflection. To date, Adichie has been an appreciative and responsive writer. It's exciting to see students getting it: modern literature is a living conversation going on in real time with real people, and my learners discover that writers/readers/thinkers *enjoy* talking to other writers/readers/thinkers.

Teaching in the Online Learning Environment

In the online learning environment where I also develop curriculum and teach, technology plays a larger role in the conversation than in the face-to-face classroom, but my philosophy still applies, perhaps even more so because research is showing that the written conversations we engage in online—via shared documents, e-editing, collaborations, discussion boards, and the like—actually motivate students to write and interact more than they would in a face-to-face setting, and their writing competencies and confidence tend to improve more rapidly. In this environment, they learn constructive ways to agree or disagree, and they learn how to communicate effectively in a spirit of good will, no matter the rhetorical situation. In addition, my students with disabilities or with multilingual challenges find that the online resources and tools I provide and integrate with our course learning management system give them accessibility and equal opportunity, and they can control how and when to access and review course material. For my students and me, the synchronous videoconferencing, interactive video/audio/text feedback on student work, clear rubrics, clear course navigation, online course materials, and up-to-the-minute grade status create a transparent, warm, successful, thriving writers' block for instructor and student alike. This environment is also ideal for students to establish their online presence and to curate a digital portfolio of their work. In this milieu, students begin to make connections to the world beyond the university and to see how their writing and reading will play a significant role in their future.

Teaching with Learner-Centered Focus

Student-centered instructional strategies in my courses serve a dual purpose. From the student's perspective, anonymous student polls and exit surveys where students can express what they are learning and what questions or concerns they have, peer review groups, student/teacher conferences

outside of class, reflective reading, writing, researching, and sharing activities stimulate student engagement, motivation, perseverance (grit), skill, and confidence. The student can measure personal growth from being a passive onlooker to an active contributor who speaks with authority and flair. From my perspective, such activities also provide valuable insight into concepts that need clarification or ways I might adapt and improve my teaching to meet each learner's needs and support their learning goals.

A former student wrote to me recently, and what she told me confirmed my teaching philosophy:

Professor Huff,

I cannot begin to express how grateful I am to have had you as my writing instructor this summer. As you saw in my reflection, I really didn't come into the course thinking I would grow mentally or gain any sort of skill set from the class that I didn't already have. With that said, I am so pleased to say that I was completely proved wrong!...Recently, I received a bit of great news regarding my PSP [Problem/Solution Proposal] *paper that I wanted to share with you. After I completed my final draft, I emailed it over to* [Dr. X] *(the psychology professor I interviewed) because he had requested that I send him the final product. Soon after,* [he] *called me to tell me that my paper was "the bomb and extremely influential" and to request that I would "co-chair" with him to implement my solution at the university. He mentioned that he wanted to get together with me and the Dean of Students to start a program in which we could better prevent alcohol use among our student body. This opportunity, as he put, "could change the lives of many students" and could possibly "look great on my graduate school application." I never thought that my writing could influence a professor and provide me with an amazing opportunity to spearhead a prevention program. It is undoubtedly one of the biggest blessings I've ever received, and I owe that to your assistance and belief in my writing ability.*

My student's letter to me in turn inspired me to write this statement of my teaching philosophy. And so, the conversation continues. I view the writers' block as a neighborly learning environment that is inclusive, life-giving and life-changing. It's a recursive process of the highest order of thought and engagement: reading well, thinking well, and writing well. It's a friendly place to live.