

Teaching Philosophy  
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When I began teaching English at Johnson County Community College in 2000, I was mentored by Dr. Helen Burnstad, Director of Staff and Faculty Development at the time. During New Faculty Orientation, Dr. Burnstad explained the meaning behind the college logo, a sunflower with one open petal. “The reason for the open petal” she explained, “is because it illustrates the spirit of JCCC: we are never closed to new ideas, we always search for innovation, we thrive on change!”

Call me young and impressionable (and I was!), but her words have had a profound effect on how I see myself as a professor, and on my responsibilities at our college. Surrounding me are innovative and hard-working people who exemplify the spirit of that open petal, and because I have always wished to fit in here, those people inspire and motivate me. To thrive at JCCC, I must keep an open, flexible mind, I must learn about and make use of the best new pedagogies and technologies, and I must be willing to understand and adapt my teaching methods and approaches to each new generation of student who comes into my classroom.

I teach writing and research, and to do it expertly, I, too, must write and research. As a scholar, I cannot afford to get behind with new research technologies, or my work would not be publishable or respected. The speed by which whole libraries have become available electronically poses many challenges at the same time that it brings about a sense of exhilaration. For example, I have no excuse for not being familiar with both cutting-edge research and primary material when I publish my own work. In the “old days,” I could make the claim that an archive was too obscure or too difficult for me to access, and my colleagues would accept that claim. Nowadays, most archival information is available electronically, and such a claim on my part would be unacceptable. Thus, simultaneous exhilaration and drowning in sources is a typical experience for me. How must my students feel when they, too, are confronted with thousands of resources, not to mention 1,000,000 hits when they type their research topic into the Google Search bar?

My own experiences as a researcher and writer thus translate into up-to-date pedagogies when it comes to helping my students in Composition I and Composition II. For example, I have learned through trial and error to exploit the potential of Google Books and the personalized Google Books Library Application for my own scholarship, and now I make those features more understandable and an asset to my Composition II students’ research needs as well. These students are tasked with producing an argumentative research paper of roughly twelve pages, and organizing and keeping track of sources is often a challenge for them. I have taught students how to set up their own Google Books Library, complete with its virtual shelves. Although not all books on Google allow a browser to read the book or journal online, the Google Books Library application is an excellent place to store sources that can then be interlibrary loaned or checked out at a local library. I have showed the students how to use the Note feature within the Google Books Library so that instead of having to do hard-copy working, annotated bibliographies, they can do them electronically. Their ability to share their shelves with classmates and with me means that we all benefit from knowing about the best sources and how to access them.

Not only can the resources available via Google Books seem overwhelming to students, but so, too, can the increasing numbers of Billington Library’s academic databases. These grow in complexity and variety every year. My methods of teaching research have thus had to adapt to this

reality of even more “information overload” than in times past. To help students I spend more time teaching the importance of reference-level research to lay a foundation. In an early-semester assignment, I require my Composition II students to use only our reference-level electronic databases (which mimic Google Books’ configuration) to explore a topic that interests them and that pertains to the semester’s overall theme. This assignment helps the students lay a foundation for further research by teaching them to use the recommended bibliography of sources that typically accompany reference-level overviews of topics. The reference-level overviews are similar, I tell students, to a zero-depth swimming pool. They wade in, acclimatize themselves to the water, and then, start swimming. Learning to navigate online, discipline-specific encyclopedias leads them to authoritative, objective information, which leads them to vetted, more specialized sources. From there, students find those recommended sources via Google Books and Billington Library, and they “house” these sources virtually in their Google Books Library. This process thus creates necessary (and appreciated) borders between all the different types and quality of information available, it allows students to carve out virtually what is essential and nonessential, and it helps them limit the research to fit the scope of a twelve-page paper. These are essential survival skills in upper-level college courses, but my ability to recognize this terrain and help students navigate it is only possible because I, too, have had to find strategies to manage sources myself.

Research is not the only thing to have changed. So, too, have students. Again, I keep in mind the open petal on that sunflower as I find strategies to maintain high expectations, but also to adapt to new generations of students. While adapting is not easy, it keeps me vibrant, relevant, and enthusiastic. One change I have seen in students is more concern about “getting it right,” doing exactly what I want, and growing anxious about possibly misunderstanding directions or my expectations, particularly for essay assignments. I have always had anxious students, but I have more anxious students than I used to. One strategy that helps allay their fears about misunderstanding is to simply do my own assignments. Before I hand out any new essay topics, I first test their viability by putting myself in the students’ position and trying to write what I am asking of them. What do I discover in the process? How do my discoveries thus help me alter, modify, clarify --or in some cases, get rid of-- the assignment? Tasking myself to do what I expect my students to do is hardly original, but I have come to see increasing value in the strategy with today’s generation of students. Certainly it makes my essay assignments clearer to students because I discover the hidden complexities and the pitfalls of what I am asking, and thus, I can revise the assignments as necessary before I hand them out. Equally important, doing my own assignments helps me predict better where students will struggle, so I can devise lessons that help them succeed.

Take, as an example, a new essay assignment for my Composition I, Workplace Focus class. Because the college promotes the Clifton StrengthsFinder test for staff, faculty and students, I participated in order to determine if it would be worth my students’ time to take the test. I found it helpful, in part because I did it from a student’s perspective and context. I thought about how, if I were a student applying for a job, I could benefit by knowing my strengths. I have now used the StrengthsFinder test for two semesters in Composition I, Workplace Focus, and I give my students an essay topic choice designed to help them determine how their newfound strengths might be used in their current jobs on in college. To discover the merit of such an essay topic, however, I first had to write about it myself, and revise the topic accordingly. In writing about which strengths I most want employers and colleagues to recognize me for, I discovered that it would be a much better essay assignment if the students were to focus on *one* major strength, rather than the top five that the test results give them. I was about three pages into my own essay when I realized I

still had three more strengths to go. If I did not want a lot of superficially developed essays, or essays that required the student to write seven or eight pages, then I would have to revise essay topic, and I did so. Students are now better equipped to write less superficially and also to not feel overwhelmed with an early essay assignment in the class. I want longer, more complicated assignments to come later in the class as we build on what we are learning about academic discourse.

My philosophy of teaching is based on many other objectives and beliefs, as well as the wisdom that experience brings. I have discovered that holding high expectations results in students trying harder. I know that approaching my students with utmost faith and confidence in their abilities to learn gives them confidence to stretch themselves intellectually. I understand that learning succeeds best in an environment where there is some levity, and where I do not take myself too seriously (perhaps my worst fault). But of all the beliefs that most influence my approach to teaching, it is the importance of being adaptable and innovative. I invest time to learn about new technologies and learning styles so that I can determine wisely what is the best to accommodate, and what is best left alone as a passing fad.