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WRITING AS A WAY TO ENGAGE THE WORLD

I was invited to talk about teaching through student writing, but I changed the title of the talk to “Teaching through Writing” because the topic also involves *my* writing in so many ways – first, because I love writing. For me writing is much more than just an output. Putting words on the paper is like planting seeds. The seeds start to flourish and then the flowers start to bloom. But it’s a process, like sketching when you’re an artist; it doesn’t all happen beforehand in my mind.

I see writing as a process of thinking, of reflection, of developing my thoughts, and that is the way I use it in my classes. I draw an analogy with the way John Ruskin used to teach drawing in 19th-century England to low-income workers, workers from the factory and the docks – he was very socially minded. It wasn’t that he wanted every dockworker to become a world-renowned painter, but he thought that everybody could benefit from engaging the world through drawing. He saw that it would change not only their drawing ability but the way they perceived the world.

WHY WRITE IN ART SCHOOL?

For me writing is the same. Why would it be specifically important for art students? First of all, if I define writing as a way of thinking and engaging the world, as a way of developing reflection, developing logical thinking, improving our ability to be coherent or cohesive, everyone could benefit from that.

If I’m teaching an art history class, I don’t want to just lecture at students; so I have them write about works on the screen or questions I’m asking because that makes them reflect in an introspective but focused way.

There are also some instrumental reasons for teaching writing in an art school. I think they're a small part of writing, but sometimes we need to convince students of the value of certain things. So, the instrumental reasons: Every artist and designer at some point will have to write a grant proposal or an artist statement. Maybe they'll read a critique of their work in a journal and want to respond. An articulate writer can do that more compellingly. And if artists and designers are thinking about issues – the environment, technology, politics or economics – they don't just think random thoughts and then translate them into an artwork or piece of design; they can use writing, thinking, expression and communication to engage the world in a meaningful manner. Writing can be a part of art and design creation.

THE RESEARCH PAPER

My classes always involve a research paper. The concerted effort of writing eight to ten pages, sustaining an argument that makes sense without being redundant, and supporting it with solid research, is a really valuable exercise that many students have never done. It also allows students to customize the class to their interests—which doesn't otherwise always happen—because they don't pick my lecture topics or the reading assignments. In the research paper they can choose what to read. For a lot of them, that makes the class more interesting.

I tailor the research paper to the levels of the class in terms of the open-endedness of the assignment. When I teach freshman classes I tend to be more specific in my assignments; instead of giving broad themes and letting students choose a topic, I give a choice of narrowly defined questions.

Lately I've been assigning a multi-stage research paper. I wanted students to understand that a paper is not created all at once. When I stagger the paper into different stages that build up, not only does it allow students to pace themselves and to finish the work on time, but my feedback gets incorporated more. They can also incorporate what we're learning in class.

When we get to the final paper, I give students supporting materials that I prepare in advance. One of them is evaluation criteria, which is basically how I define a research paper: What is an argument? What is clear evidence? What does it mean to develop and fully flesh out a paper? What does organization mean? I call the document "grading criteria"; it is an incentive for them to actually read the document because they may think that's how they can get the grade in the class.

I also give students a style guide and grammar suggestions based on my experience of the most common mistakes students make. I don't grade papers on grammar, though I know that some teachers do – maybe because I am a non-native speaker of English. I don't do it for a zillion reasons, but cohesive, clear, compelling thinking can happen even if someone doesn't

use the right preposition or spelling. I want to make that clear to my students, especially here at RISD with so many ESL students. I have had amazing thinkers whose papers, at first glance, look like they're written in broken English, but when you get to the thought behind those crooked words the paper is actually clear and well researched and insightful.

I also like to sneak in writing when the students don't realize that's what I'm doing. How do I do that? Mostly through informal assignments that are not graded. They play into participation, and, above all, these assignments get students to practice writing, to hone their skills. Practice really improves writing before they have to write a paper or before they have to write an exam. And for quiet students, writing is often the only way that I have to know what they're thinking and how they're engaging with the class materials.

MY CRITICAL FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

Perhaps the most effective way I use writing in my classes is the feedback that I give to students. I make comments on the pages of their writing, and then I always write a final comment at the end. I spend an insane amount of time giving feedback – that's one of my challenges as a junior faculty – but that is where I think I am the most effective. When students read my comments and return their final paper or the next stage of the assignment, their improvement is amazing. I see the way they respond not only to the specific comments that I make on the page, but to the fact that I took the time to read their paper so carefully. It affects their engagement with the whole class, with participation, with doing the other assignments, with their relationship with me. Writing is a very intimate activity, so a student's research paper is a window into that student's mind.

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Dr. Daniela Sandler is an assistant professor in the Department of History of Art and Visual Culture. Before joining the RISD faculty in 2006, she taught at Bryn Mawr College and the University of Rochester. She received her master and doctorate degrees from the University of Rochester's Program in Visual and Cultural Studies. She has an undergraduate degree in Architecture and Urbanism from the University of Sao Paulo. Sandler has received both a DAAD Scholarship and a RISD Professional Development grant for field research in Germany. She completed Brown University's Sheridan Certificate Program in 2008.