TEACHING

My teaching effectiveness has been developing over the past thirty years of teaching, researching, and learning with my students and colleagues. When teaching, I focus on the cognitive, as well as the affective, aspects of teaching.

The Cognitive Aspects of My Teaching

We know from research and theory what successful readers do. They are active and make predictions based upon what they already know and the emerging text. They use cuing systems as they approach a text: semantic, syntactic, and grapho-phonemic. They approach the text strategically.

Developmental students, on the other hand, are underprepared for the academic tasks they meet in their college classes. Either they have developed more slowly and fallen behind their age mates, or their previous schooling has poorly prepared them for college. Their reading has been limited. They do not approach text as if they expect to find meaning. They are passive rather than active. They do not make predictions. They do not use syntactic and grapho-phonemic clues to unlock unfamiliar words. They do not see the relationships among reading, writing, and oral language.

To build on their existing knowledge, experiences and strategies (their schema), I must first determine what they already know and go from there (Rumelhart, 1980; Schank and Abelson, 1977). For example, I have learned that developmental students often confuse fact and opinion. In Preparatory Reading and Writing (PRW) II, the learners are expected to engage in both reader response journals and summary writing. Both are to be based on the assigned reading passages. Most students confuse summary writing and journal writing. In particular, they persist in including opinions in both their journals and their summaries. Typically, however, my developmental students understand the rhetorical form of the journal entries, as this is very similar to their strong oral traditions.

I build on this strength. Among developmental learners, oral language tends to be much better developed than written language. Through discussion of the reading passages and debate about the issues that emerge, we make distinctions between their own opinions and the evidence found in the text. I encourage them to support their assertions with citations from the text. We determine the author’s thesis and the author’s major supporting details. By using this oral mode, one where my students have more confidence, I am able to help them better understand written text and the essential elements of a well-written summary.

Developmental readers often need what Langer and Applebee (1987) call scaffolding. To do this I must first determine each student’s grasp of the strategy, what Vygotsky (1978) calls the individual’s zone of proximal development. When this is determined, I can then create some scaffolding, enough support to help each student become a more independent learner. For example, in a Preparatory Reading and Writing II class, we were working on summary writing.
Student-selected peer groups were working on a student-selected reading passage to summarize. The peer groups were to find and share the thesis and major details of support. Even with the help of his peer group, one student could not understand how to find the thesis or major details. When I visited this group and understood the difficulty, I had him underline the main idea in one paragraph and locate and draw arrows from several pieces of evidence to that main idea. His response was, "I always heard about this but I never knew what it meant until just now. I just never really knew." From this experience, the student developed one strategy to help him locate the main ideas and major details of a reading passages and move closer to being an independent learner.

The Affective Aspects of My Teaching

It is not only necessary for me to transmit and develop knowledge; I believe that it is my responsibility to help students believe in themselves. This is the affective domain. Many of my developmental students view themselves as academic failures. Before they can learn, I must help them recognize the gifts, talents, and strategies that they already possess. I have learned that students have a wealth of knowledge to build on.

Most of my students have complex lives that hamper them from concentrating on academics. Students’ complicated lives must be acknowledged. Therefore, on the first day of class, the students are instructed to get out a piece of paper and a writing instrument, fold the paper in half, and write the word "Goals" on one half, and write "Baggage" on the other half. After we write for two minutes, I tell the students to stop and look at me. As I look at the frustrated looks on their faces, I tell the students to celebrate this moment because this might be the first time in their lives that they want to write and someone tells them to stop.

We continue to complete our "goals" and "baggage" lists for three more minutes. Then, while I carry a three-foot garbage can into the classroom, the students are told to tear their "baggage" lists in half. The students must get out of their seats and throw their "baggage" away. I tell the students that their families, friends, children, and jobs are important, but we must leave that baggage at the door when we enter this classroom. We are here to learn; we want nothing to distract us from our work. Over the years, I have found this to be a simple but powerful activity. My students' body language changes; they begin to view our classroom, this academic place, as a place where they belong.

I strive to create a community of learners, working and learning together. Each student's success is our success. I strongly believe in collaborative learning techniques and that a great deal of individual growth is enhanced through cooperative and collaborative activities, as proposed by Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, and Roy (1984) and Slavin (1983). This is not just group work, but positive interdependence and documented peer learning.

In conclusion, I am constantly assessing, evaluating, and adapting my pedagogy in light of what is transpiring inside and outside of my classroom. I am also reading current research and attending professional conferences. What I am looking for are more techniques and strategies to enhance my teaching, theoretical frames that give coherence to my teaching techniques, and research that validates or refutes what I am doing.