News Roundup—Sybil Priebe, Editor, “TYCA to You”

Creativity and Sass and Inspiration Were Requested! I asked the reps to have their fellow teacher pals fill in these prompts: “Dear Teacher Down the Hall, ___” and “Dear Student, ___. “ Enjoy the creativity of your colleagues!

My Attempts:

Dear Student, I am not the secretary of the other instructor in this office; I do not have time to track her down on your behalf. Yes, perhaps she should be here during her office hour, but your attitude doesn’t make it more likely that she will appear out of thin air. Poof!

Dear Student, The idea is that you’ll complete the regular work, so you don’t have to beg for extra work at the end of the semester.

Dear Student, In order to pass this class, please build a time machine. Go back to the beginning of the semester. Try again. Gods speed.

Dear Teacher Down the Hall, When are we having a cocktail?

From My Colleagues:

Dear Teacher Down the Hall, glad you’re still here.

Dear Student, you haven’t studied lately, have you?

Dear Teacher Down the Hall, Just keep swimming, just keep swimming . . .

Dear Student, No, it is not a dumb or obvious question. Think of it this way: if you hadn’t asked, you wouldn’t know the answer and would have either
been misled or mistaken in your work and had to do it all over. And that is dumb.

From a Faculty Member at Williston State in North Dakota:

Dear Teacher Down the Hall: What do you want me to prepare our students to be able to do as far as written communication in your classroom?

Dear Teacher Down the Hall: Will you observe a workplace in your field with me so we can prepare your students for the communication they will have to do in your content area?

Dear Student: Do you want to walk with me down to the writing lab?

Dear Student: How can I get you to use what I’m trying to teach you in my class in your other classes?

TYCA-Midwest Report from Alan Hutchison

Everything I Learned about Teaching I Learned from My Dog Trainer

As I took my dog through puppy obedience classes, I was struck by the connection between dog training that uses operant conditioning from psychology and possibilities for working with my students. Here is a summary of what I learned and applied.

Planning

1. Know what you want the desired behavior(s) to look like.
2. Construct an assignment that will enable students to make a good choice in terms of desired behaviors.
3. Make the assignments manageable by breaking them into smaller tasks.
5. Determine what constitutes mastery, approximation, and what is not acceptable.

Using Positive Reinforcement

6. Observe behavior. For mastery, behavior should meet prestated criteria for mastery. For approximation, behavior should meet prestated criteria for what is acceptable.
7. If behavior falls within approximate or mastery range depending on our pre-determined criteria, mark the behavior; that is, indicate that the behavior met the criteria. In other words, let students know that they have done well.
8. Select a limited number of behaviors to mark (tag point). Ignore the other undesired behaviors. Then, use the undesired behavior as the focus for creating the next set of tag points. In other words, don’t overwhelm students with lots of negative marks. And use what they didn’t do well as the basis for subsequent lessons.

9. Recognize students’ internal sense of reward. According to a psychological researcher named Sulposki, when animals and people do well, they get a shot of dopamine. Dopamine is a natural motivator that increases drive, focus, engagement, enthusiasm, and buy-in. In other words, being successful generates the desire for more success.

10. Using a variable reward schedule (sometimes assignments are graded, sometimes not) will increase the level of dopamine in the brain. According to Sulposki, the release of dopamine comes from the anticipation of a reward, not the reward itself.

Motivation

11. Consider the Premack Principle: “High probability reinforces low probability behavior.” That is, behavior is reinforced when the consequences of that behavior is that person gets to engage in an activity that he or she would freely choose to do at that moment. Students would like to be active (role play, simulations, etc.), be engaged in something intellectually challenging, be using technology, be participating in stimulating conversations, be giving and receiving assistance, and be having fun (learning games and humor). In other words, classes that are student centered result in better attendance, focus, and performance.

Corrections and Resistance

12. Give students opportunities for self-correction.

13. Be aware of the multiple causes of frustration and resistance and that frustration is often the first step in growth.

14. Consider strategies for preventing frustration and resistance: early in the semester and the class hour, provide opportunities for success; liberally reward success; recognize approximate success, issue invitations to change; celebrate error; and generate an atmosphere of fun.

Conditions for Best Results

15. Learning most often takes place in the context of appropriate levels of expectation to begin with increased, appropriately sequenced increased expectations, positive reinforcement, consistency, patience, and kindness.

Submitted by: Judy Hauser (Des Moines Area Community College)

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TYCA-Southeast Report from Susan Slavicz

Dear Student,

Your education is not all about books and learning facts. Even though you attend a community college with no residence halls, part of your education should involve learning to relate to and understand people who come from different backgrounds and perhaps from other countries.

Take time to meet people—especially people who seem to have a different view of life. One of the great aspects of college life is stepping outside the boundaries of our own experiences to embrace new and exciting possibilities. If you take a foreign language, participate in cultural days that plan meals or introduce you to cultural celebrations. If you take a world religion course, visit religious centers outside your faith.

If your instructor gives you the opportunity to work with fellow classmates, embrace the opportunity to hone your people skills. Listen to other people’s ideas; learn that a valuable skill in life is the ability to listen to other people and recognize the value of that interchange.

You will also have the opportunity on our campus to explore areas of culture beyond your own. We have an art gallery—yes, right on campus! We have an annual student exhibit so consider taking a painting or sculpture class, even if you have never considered yourself an artist. Attempting the art can only increase your appreciation for an artist’s craft.

We have a drama program that not only includes drama students but also production students who learn skills from building sets to producing wardrobes. Take a production or acting class to add to your skill set. If you don’t want to be involved in the production of plays, please at least attend them. There is no replacement for a live stage production.

Attend some of our musical concerts or take one of our introductory music classes. We have amazing talent in our chorus and bands. Expand your music appreciation to some of the classics—or learn to appreciate concert jazz.

Some of the best experiences of my life occurred outside the college classroom. I know you probably work—but carve out time to explore the entire college experience. You might forget the material you learned to pass a history test, and you might forget the science formula for an experiment, but I doubt you will forget the people you meet or the experiences you have.

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TYCA-Northeast Report from Leigh Jonaitis

Dear Teacher Down the Hall

We say this to students:

Keep your mind open
to that which is beyond you
Know your experience is limited
And then you can grow.
The best among us
walk that talk
Others talk of life in the trenches
And I wonder who you are fighting
You say you never needed hand holding
And I imagine your childhood without
parents and teachers and dreams and community
You must have learned to walk on your own.
You shake your head
And roll your eyes
And spend time distracted
by their smartphone distraction
Or else by what
They don’t know these days
The papers
They plagiarize
The ways
They cheat
The excuses for late work
The references
They don’t know
You wear your Beloit Mindset
My word, you say
The words They use
u cannot c beyond an i
When you meet a student
who needs adaptation
Don’t sigh
that extra time on tests is far less than
the time they have spent
Sorting out the exact ways
they believe they are broken
How I wish you could
forget the bootstraps you pulled up and
wash off your own grit
To uncover that which is beyond you
For when your hands are wrung
You cannot hold another’s.

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Dear Student,

In your time at this college and the others that may make up your educational journey, I’m certain that you will see change. A few things have distinguished mine: manual typewriter to electric typewriter to PC to laptop to tablet to phone; floppy discs to CDs to USBs to clouds; in-person registration to phone to dial-up to high-speed internet; day classes, night classes, weekend classes to learning communities to hybrid to fully online; AA to BA to MA to EdD; bike to bus to train to car to telecommute; quarters to semesters to shortened semesters to late start to intersessions to cyber sessions; audiocassette recordings to digital files; VHS to DVD to GoPro and YouTube; manuals to tutorials to search bars and Google; office hours to study groups to TAs to email to chat rooms to text and video messaging. The world has your menu. If you’re in an à la carte moment in your life, you seek out what you need. Resources are there, and if you buy the package deal the college offers, you’ll have that document that says you’ve seen an evolution of delivery, interaction, and thought. Proceed carefully; take nothing for granted. When you find that choices are hard and not guaranteed, you may just find that this college idea was a permission-granting institution—permission to open your mind and widen the path just a little so that you may see your own potential in a world that requires results.

Sincerely,
Your instructor

Dear Student:

As you learned on the first day of class, I keep regular office hours. What are they for? Really, whatever you want them to be for. Worried about your grade? Not clear about the assignments? Need help writing a paper? Wondering what other English courses you will need to take? Just like to get to know your instructor a little better? Why not stop by?

Ah! You don’t know where my office is. Email me and I’ll send along detailed directions. Oh—you’re afraid you’re going to disturb me or take up my time? My office hours are your hours. That’s right. I’m paid to help you at those times, not to get more of my work done (though if no one shows up, that’s what I’ll do). So you will not be “bothering” me.

You are not doing too well in class and so you don’t want to “face” me? Guess who usually turns up during office hours? That’s right—the students headed for an A, the ones who actually don’t need much extra help. But they are engaged in the coursework and seek an even firmer grip on what we are learning together, or they even seek to learn something extra.

Who is it that I usually don’t see during office hours? Those students who really need the help. When do I finally see them? At the very end of the semester, when they realize they may not pass the course. Then they come by, for the first time ever, maybe one week before the end of the semester, won-
dering how they can raise their grade or what they can do for extra credit. Unfortunately by then, it is usually too late.

So please, early in the semester, take a bit of time to stop by. I’d like to get to know you a little better than whatever I learned during a brief icebreaker introduction during the first week of class. I’d be happy to offer whatever advice I’m qualified to give on making your way through my course, or through college, or through life. I’d like to refer you to a counselor, to our skills center, to our writing center, to financial aid, or to many other places on campus that can help you.

Please don’t wait until the end of the semester. Here’s hoping you’ll soon darken my door.

Sincerely,
Your Instructor

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TYCA-Pacific Northwest Report from Teresa Thonney

I invited some of my colleagues in the Pacific Northwest to “write a letter” to students or colleagues. Here are the letters I received.

Dear Student, Yes, you missed something important when you were not in class yesterday.

Dear Student, Peer review means getting free points for doing something you have to do eventually anyway.

Dear Student, “Difficulty finding a parking spot” is not a reason to arrive to class late every day. It is a reason to start leaving your home earlier each morning.

Dear Student,
You asked me how you can succeed in this class.
The recipe for success in a college writing course isn’t difficult: Show up to class and take notes—every day; complete all homework; read feedback from your instructor and make adjustments; when you’re stumped, seek one-on-one help from me or writing center tutors; turn in assignments on time; and revise papers when given the opportunity.

It’s not rocket science. Just good old-fashioned hard work combined with the right attitude.

Sincerely,
Your Instructor

Dear Student, Clichés are like good writing except they are not; they’re more like bad similes.
Dear Adjunct Colleague,

Thanks for chatting with me the other day. I wouldn’t have blamed you for being irritated with me: I, bounding with enthusiasm out of my last class of the day, excited you were there; you, on a new campus, struggling to prep for an evening class using your cell phone and WiFi sitting on a third-floor bench, inspired to change everything at the last minute. Glad you asked about workspace. There are cubes downstairs, and you could use my spot, I pointed to my cubicle. I’ m done for the day.

You hustled off, no doubt busy, but maybe also a little frustrated at what I said. I wish I could offer help in a way that didn’t highlight how unfair all of this is.

But before you left, I wanted to say, I’ m glad you’re here. This college wouldn’t function without you and adjuncts like you.

Ryan

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TYCA-Southwest Report from Liz Ann Baez Aguilar

“Why Do I Have to Write Letters?”

When Sybil referenced this topic, I was elated. Why? Because letters have been a part of my life since childhood, and they still remain a part of my life and my students’ lives as well, since I include them every semester as a part of their assignments. I am often surprised to hear my students tell me that they have never written a letter before, and they repeatedly ask me, “Why do I have to write letters?” My response to these students includes a brief history of letter writing with an emphasis on communication. For many of us, we grew up reading all types of letters from family and friends, pen pals, and historical letters, too.

Thus, let us keep writing letters to our students, to our friends, and for the love of writing.

September 5, 2017

Dear Students:

As a reflection piece to think about this week, I wanted to share with you a quote that I read on a bumper sticker on my way home yesterday evening. The quote said, “You’ll get through this.” As I read it, I knew I wanted to share it with all of you. I began to contemplate on the subject and important message that the bumper sticker was sharing to all drivers, I realized that no matter how difficult of an hour, day, or week it had been thus far, I had to remember that I “would get through this trying time and move forward.”

We all experience this same feeling from time to time, and sometimes it just happens when we are least expecting it, but we continue to move
forward, and we keep on going, and this is the resiliency that I see in each of you this semester! Have a great remainder of the week.

Sincerely,
Your instructor

September 25, 2017

Dear Students,

Last week, I thought about how difficult it must have been for all of the people in Puerto Rico to see their commonwealth destroyed. I thought about how many hands must have labored years ago to help build all of the many homes, commercial properties, schools, and sanctuaries. In 24 hours after the hurricane, the people began to see the residual of the storm's aftermath. I cannot begin to imagine what the residents of Puerto Rico felt as they witnessed such destruction.

Joshua Marine stated, “Challenges are what make life interesting and overcoming them is what makes life meaningful.” The people of Puerto Rico will have to confront many challenges in the weeks, months, and years ahead, but they will overcome! Marine’s quote stated one crucial word, meaningful. At times, you have to consider what is truly meaningful at this moment in your life, and what is meaningful in terms of your educational aspirations. Try to make time this week and take a brief moment each day to consider what is truly meaningful to you in terms of your life, goals, and education, and always remember that amidst life’s daily challenges, you are an overcomer!

Sincerely,
Your instructor

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TYCA-West Report from Louise Bown

The 2010 TYCA-West Conference was held at the College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas, NV, October 8-9, 2010. The theme was “Entering the Conversation: Creating Actionable Knowledge.” Our guest speaker, Robert M. Sheldrake, gave a presentation on how we can engage students in the conversations about writing.

TYCA-West Report from Rob Lively

In Ld’Tobin’s Writing Relationships, he often points out that what the teachers view in the classroom is not what the students perceive of the classroom experience. We all have stories of seemingly clear directions we compose that are not clear at all, and the students struggle to comprehend what we are trying to get across. While students do their best to write and read to the best of their ability, it can sometimes go awry. David Bartholomae remarks upon this in “Inventing the University” when he explains that he is “continually impressed by the patience and good will of our students” (5). What these scholars help us understand is that sometimes college instructors need to understand and embrace these student mishaps and appreciate the efforts of their mistakes.

Consider the following short letter from a colleague to his student:
Dear Student,

Please read the syllabus. It has valuable information in there. For instance, it clearly lists the books for the class. Read this carefully and buy the right ones!

My colleague explains that he had the class read Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* in his class because it had a lot of rich material about families, practicality versus idealism, and it boasted a western geography that he thought would inspire the students to engage in the materials. One student came to class all the time, but his responses in class were strange. He would bring up obscure parts about Alaska. Instead of writing about preparedness in the book, he wrote about the conditions of Alaska or how beautiful he thought it was.

My colleague pulled him aside after a couple of short assignments read strange to him. He asked the student if he had really been doing the reading. The student assured the instructor he had. He then asked how he felt about McCandless’s family dynamic. The student said he hadn’t come across McCandless yet in the book. Frustrated, the instructor asked to see the student’s book to show him that McCandless is mentioned early in the book. The student reached into his backpack and pulled out *The Call of the Wild*. The student had been reading Jack London’s classic about the gold rush in Alaska. Somehow the student never mentioned that none of the conversation or the details matched his reading experience. Each time the response writings occurred, he would try and write something about his reading he could somehow tangentially tie to the reading.

The student was trying, struggling, to make sense out of a reading that didn’t seem to make sense. Misreading the syllabus led to quite a bit of anxiety for both the teacher and the student. My colleague asked me how often we make assumptions about student performance without knowing the complete picture. Even simple things like clearly reading the syllabus can make a huge difference in student performance. And yet as Bartholome points out, my colleague was “impressed by the good will” of his student. Once this small detail was corrected, my colleague said the student did fine.

Works Cited


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