

## Lara Avery: Teaching Philosophy

No matter where a student meets me in their academic journey, I believe their progress is hindered by shame. Shame arises when students don't meet the expectations of those around them, and many arrive already priming themselves to be subpar. They have ideas about themselves as people, as students, as writers, and they think they will not achieve past or beyond this idea. By diminishing themselves, they think they are getting the jump on disappointment. This kind of shame breeds minimal effort, apathy, and frustration, which in turn breeds an inability to perform, which breeds more shame.

I don't believe there is any such thing as a student who is not a writer. Everyone needs to communicate, and therefore everyone writes. I'm not interested in deciding whether or not they are "good," and I don't think students should be focused on anyone's definition of "good" besides their own. I want to know how I can help students be the most effective communicators they can possibly be.

As a teacher, I strive to provide:

- concrete, achievable definitions of success
- an environment where students can be subjective, not where they are responding to my subjectivity
- examples of success that are relevant to student goals
- help with dividing big assignments into manageable portions
- assignments that facilitate different kinds of creativity, not ask vaguely for "creativity" without defining it
- assignments that have a clear purpose in the academic or non-academic world
- help learning and succeeding at close reading
- giving as much individual attention as possible

No student or group of students has the same needs or goals. Effective teaching is measuring student needs, helping them define their goals based on those needs, and helping them achieve those goals. Acknowledging that students' processes and goals are unique is an integral part of my teaching philosophy, especially when teaching writing. There are few reasons for this:

- In the history of writing, no one has ever agreed what "good writing" is, and they're not about to start now. The rules of writing, if there is such a set thing, are often broken.
- Writing, though collaborative at many stages, is individual. Therefore, the habits and standards that surround it must be based on the individual.
- When writing is collaborative, an individual who knows their own taste, limits, and skillset is going to be a more effective collaborator.
- In many ways, a writing teacher is also an editor. They must point at specific successes and errors in student pieces, so the student can improve. None of these errors or successes are going to look the same, or be in the same context.

My assignments invite students to write about subjects they care about, and to set their own goals for the assignment's success. From the start, they will know they are not being judged on the quality of their writing by my subjective tastes, but by their own standards of effectiveness.

Assignments will include outlining, revision, and one-on-one conferences. All processes are flexible enough in their methods to be executed by the individual based on their experience and learning style. The one-on-one conferences will facilitate my ability to guide students in their mapping and revision processes in a way that is unique to their goals and abilities.

In academic environments, close reading is usually used in analysis, but it's a lot more fun in writing environments. Instead of breaking sentences apart and re-contextualizing them, as they would in analysis, students will get to turn around and apply the skills they just used. We emphasize the importance of careful syntax and word choice by seeing different combinations and what effect they have; the words we work with are not fixed, and therefore the exercise is both critical and generative.

My reading assignments center on sessions of "group close reading." As a group, my class examines effective and ineffective examples of course-relevant essays, and attempts to identify what works and what doesn't work. I think doing close reading in a group setting is a lot less intimidating than individual close reading, because students can close read in dialogue with each other. They can follow the "eyes" of more detail-oriented students and teach themselves in real time without the pressure of coming up with ideas that may still be new to them. This is also a low-pressure way to un-install unproductive ideas they might have about "good" or "bad" writing. By reading together, everyone starts to realize they know what works for that particular assignment and what doesn't work, and they come to this realization without shaming themselves.

Finally, I believe student progress and assessment should not be measured in terms of "mastery." I think placing that word in the context of a learning environment invites pressure, because even the most experienced and well-lauded writers would have a hard time owning this term. Those who call a writer a "master" are audiences, critics, or, in any case, subjective consumers of artistic work, with their own standards, biases, and cultural capital. "Mastery" also connotes hours and hours of practice, to which most students don't yet have access; cultural award or achievement, which is a flawed system of reward; and the "pinnacle" or end of a long process, whereas most students are just beginning.

Students can set expectations for themselves (or have clear expectations set from the people that guide them), and they can either meet those expectations, exceed them, or fall short. My individualistic, goal-oriented writing classroom will invite practice, failure, and very gradual progress.