

Feature Article: “Writing Beyond the Fix” by John Tassoni

When I ask students what they want to achieve in a writing class, they often tell me they hope they will learn to “fix” mistakes in their writing. The frequency of this response has led me to ponder various uses of the word “fix” (e.g., “I’ll fix you!” “Can anyone fix this car?” “I need a fix,” or “I’m taking this dog to the vet to get him fixed.”) and, relatedly, the various ways it conceptualizes writing as an exercise in error reduction (if not behavior modification) rather than as a process of exploration and meaning making. Among other areas of writing instruction, participants at the **2013 Institute for a Superior Liberal Arts Education** shared best practices that shift students’ focus from narrow notions of correctness to a sense of writing as social act, one committed to the scrutiny, discovery, and expression of ideas.

Toward this goal, faculty can develop challenging writing assignments that require students to compose several drafts, and these assignments can provide multiple opportunities for teachers and other class members to comment on student writing. While feedback might still indicate issues with correctness, teacher and peer response can also question claims, highlight accomplishments, and indicate additional perspectives students could consider. For many student writers, this might be the first time anyone has ever challenged the veracity of their ideas rather than just their mastery of sub-skills, such as grammar and punctuation.

Teachers can make sure these challenges are supportive by meeting one-on-one with students to discuss the ideas expressed in their writing. These conferences help students recognize encouraging tones rather than the demeaning ones they can perceive in instructors’ written comments. These supportive exchanges with their teachers also position students as intellectuals: with their teachers, they explore ideas, reexamine assumptions, consider course content in the context of the student writers’ interests and concerns. These moments also create opportunities for teachers to delve into what might have been formerly dismissed as “mistakes” but what might actually speak volumes about students’ ways of grappling with subject matter and integrating new ideas and language forms into their accustomed modes of communicating. A supportive environment that focuses on ideas, in other words, takes writing instruction beyond the “fix” alone and creates spaces where students and teachers experience the writing process as a form of discovery.

Teachers can further ensure a supportive atmosphere for meaning making by reserving opportunities for writing that is ungraded. Frequent chances to write in-class, out-of-class, “low stakes” (informal and ungraded) as well as “high stakes” (formal and graded) papers provide venues for students to use writing as a way to think for themselves. Toward a similar goal, students can meet in class to exchange drafts of their papers and be provided with guidelines that help them respond to each other’s work with a focus on ideas rather than just lower-level editing concerns (the “fix”). Workshops structured in this manner disrupt fix-it-shop approaches students might otherwise bring with them to composing. These sessions also create opportunities for students to engage with the diverse perspectives of peers, allow students to experience ways an actual audience might comprise these diverse perspectives, and encourage students to exercise their ability to make writing choices that will help them express their ideas to a variety of audiences.

Together, these approaches to writing assignments, classroom exercises, and response to student work can generate a supportive environment for writing serves more as a creative and critical act---to move beyond “the fix.”