

Teaching Philosophy

Claire C. Lamonica

*Dear Coach,
I hope you don't mind that I'm calling you coach. I'm thinking that I have two coaches this year. Coach [name omitted] is my [sport omitted] coach and you are my writing coach. . . .*

Far from “minding,” I was delighted to read these words in an e-mail from an international student enrolled in my first year composition class. Just weeks earlier, during the Writing Program’s orientation for new writing instructors, we had asked everyone to draw pictures of their metaphors for teaching. My own sketch, a rudimentary self-portrait, showed me standing on the sidelines of a classroom wearing a whistle around my neck: teacher as coach.

As my story (above) suggests, I’ve always been more of a bookworm than an athlete, but other members of my family are involved in athletics, and over the years I’ve come to see coaching as a productive model for my own teaching and have tried to adopt some of its precepts as I understand them. For example:

1. See even the least experienced athletes as players.

Coaches, I’ve noticed, encourage even their least experienced athletes to see themselves as real players. When I teach a writing class, I want my students to see themselves as writers; when I teach a methods course or a seminar in teaching, I want my students to see themselves as teachers; when I conduct a workshop or teach a course for experienced classroom teachers, I want them to see themselves as reflective practitioners and/or classroom researchers. To this end, I offer lots of opportunities for my students to engage in writing, teaching, reflection, and research; to identify and practice the skills they need; to identify and explore the strategies that successful writers, teachers, and teacher researchers have used in the past; and to adapt those strategies to meet their own needs.

“I just love the sound of writers at work!” I tell students in my writing classes. Visit us on any given day, and you’ll hear those sounds: the tap of keyboards, the chatter of consultation and collaboration, even the muffled beat of music from student headphones. My students are almost always writing before I arrive at class. They enter the lab as soon as they are allowed (I had one group of students that “took on” a lab monitor who tried to tell them they had to stay in the hall until class time; “Dr. Lamonica told us we could come in and write!” they told him. And they did.) Students open their “daily notes” (my message to them for the day), and get to work on the writing task at hand. On our very best days we all get so involved in writing that we lose track of the time and the period ends in a mad rush to close files and leave the lab while there’s still time for everyone to get to the next class. In class at least, we are all writers.

2. Take the game seriously.

Others may see an athletic competition as “just a game,” but successful coaches and players take their sports seriously. Part of my job as a teacher is helping students understand why writing matters so they can take it seriously. Another part is taking their work seriously myself.

Patrice and I were sitting at her computer discussing a draft of the text she was revising when she turned to me and said, “I love this class! I never had a teacher who sat down and really talked to me about my writing before.” I didn’t know whether to be gratified or horrified. I was glad to

hear she was enjoying the class, but taken aback to hear that talking about her writing was a new experience for her.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) identifies talking to students about their writing as one of the practices most helpful in developing proficient writers. Such conversations are worthwhile not only for the explicit messages they send (“This text is successful because you . . .”) but for the implicit messages they send as well (“Your writing is important, worthy of our time and consideration”).

3. Treat the players with respect.

Not all coaches treat their players with respect, but those who don’t run the risk of making headlines or (at some levels) losing their jobs. Teachers who don’t treat their students with respect risk disrupting the teaching-learning process to the point where they can no longer do their jobs effectively.

I learned this one the hard way. I’m sure there have been multiple occasions when I’ve failed to reach a student because I failed to treat him or her with the respect s/he deserved, but one that came to mind recently involved a freshman student in a writing class. This student wanted to be a teacher, and she was disgruntled by the University’s requirement that she take “pointless” general education courses for most of her first two years. She vented her frustration in a paper condemning the General Education program as a waste of time, and in a response to an early draft, I tried to provide a counter-argument, noting that a University had a different role to play than a trade school. I was, in fact, irritated by her blanket condemnation, but I didn’t realize that my irritation had come through in my response until I realized that somehow, I had lost that student. Not physically—she was still in class every day; but mentally—she had tuned me out; it showed in her posture, her facial expression, and her demeanor.

It wasn’t until I read the reflective piece she turned in with her unit packet that I discovered what I’d done wrong. In that text, she said, “My teacher doesn’t think I belong at this school. She thinks I should go to a trade school instead.” That wasn’t what I’d said; it certainly wasn’t what I meant; but it was what she read, and in that reading, she saw me as an instructor who lacked respect for a student. That story had a relatively happy ending: after I read her reflection, I was able to assure her that I did indeed think she belonged at the University and we were able to restore at least some semblance of a working relationship. I know, though, that there have been other times when I failed to treat students with respect and wasn’t able to correct the situation. Those are the instances that keep me awake at night, and each time it happens, I vow it will never happen again; then I pray that it’s true.

4. Identify each player’s strengths.

In order to be successful, a coach needs to be able to identify each player’s strengths and capitalize on them. This ability is even more important for teachers. Howard Gardner’s work with multiple intelligences has institutionalized the notion that students’ individual strengths can be used as gateways to learning in all subject areas. Patricia Dunn’s work in *Sketching, Talking, Moving*, shows composition instructors in particular how to help students succeed in the writing classroom even when their primary intelligences are not verbal/linguistic.

When I first became the Assistant Director of Writing Programs at Illinois State University, the walls of the computer labs where writing is taught were almost unremittingly bare. These days it’s not unusual for a visitor to any given lab to find the walls festooned with literacy maps, graphic representations of student and instructor writing processes, sentence strips providing student-generated documentation tips, neighborhood maps, life graphs, and so on. Similarly, it’s

not unusual to see students out of their seats—or even their classrooms—engaged in “walk and talk” activities, going on writing crawls, or moving from computer to computer reading and responding to each other’s work. (This could be done through the network, but physically moving to a different computer seems to have benefits for some learners.) These changes in classroom environment are clearly related to the changes we made over time in our instructor orientation: integrating activities that draw on a number of intelligences and talking explicitly about how they can be used to increase student success in the composition classroom.

5. See every player as a developing player.

Most athletic teams are composed of players with ability levels ranging from the unparalleled to the not-quite-ready-for-competition-at-this-level. The coach’s job is to ensure that every player makes progress, whether that means moving from the not-quite-ready to the competent or from the unparalleled to the better-than-anyone-could-have-imagined.

“Every writer is a developing writer,” I tell graduate students learning to teach freshman composition, “and every teacher is a developing teacher.” In composition, the term “developmental writing” has a rather specific meaning in reference to courses where the least adept students of writing are often placed. The idea is that these writers will benefit from some sort of specialized instruction and will, over time, become sufficiently competent to join other students in “regular” writing courses. While I’m in favor of providing additional support for students who need it, I’m also in favor as seeing every writer—student or otherwise—as one who can learn, grow, develop over time. “If Mark Twain can become a better writer over time,” I tell students in every writing course I teach, “then so can you.” And they do.

6. Allow time for practice.

Players’ growth over time is largely attributable to the fact that coaches see “the big game” as the tip of the iceberg. The critical mass that keeps the tip above water is time allowed for practice. Successful coaches don’t spend a lot of time lecturing about “how the game is played.” They get the players on the field as quickly as possible and watch for teachable moments. Offering suggestions and encouragement from the sidelines is crucial, but the players have to be engaged in the task at hand. Punters need to punt; setters need to set . . .

writers need to write; teachers need to teach. If you walk into my writing classroom, you’ll see writers at work: brainstorming ideas, drafting texts, consulting their peers, discussing their work with me, turning entire paragraphs into lists of sentences that can be edited easily, deciding what to leave in and what to take out and how to organize what’s left. If you walk into my methods class, you’ll see teachers at work: facilitating classroom discussions, demonstrating mini-lessons, recording classmates’ ideas on large sheets of newsprint to create “wall text” (Meeks and Austin), composing entries for their teaching journals, and designing instructional materials to be showcased in their teaching portfolios. Eventually we have a “game”—a time when each writer and teacher must demonstrate what s/he has learned (a portfolio of finished texts; a student teaching experience), but in class we practice.

7. Watch the films and develop a game plan.

To those who don’t coach, it looks like pretty cushy occupation: show up for a few hours of practice and stand on the sidelines shouting instructions on game day. How tough can it be? What the casual observer doesn’t see is the enormous amount of work behind the scenes, watching films, planning drills, determining line-ups, designing game plans, and more.

Successful teachers, like successful coaches, devote significant amounts of time to behind-the-scenes planning. Occasionally I’ll ask a writing instructor whether I can visit a class, and s/he’ll

say, “Oh, we’re just doing peer response that day. Why don’t you come on a day when I’m teaching?” But a “peer response day” can actually give me a lot of information about an instructor’s teaching. In order to create strong peer response experience, the instructor has to have devoted a significant amount of time to planning. Just telling students to “respond to each other’s drafts” is assigning writing, not teaching it . . .and, as the National Writing Project points out, that’s an important distinction. Productive peer response sessions result from informed decision-making on the part of the instructor, who has to decide on the basis of prior observation and experience which students might make appropriate response partners, what to do if a student arrives in class without a draft, whether the responses will be oral or written, and, especially, how to prompt substantive responses rather than a series of meaningless comments like, “Nice job!”

8. Have a “Plan B,” too.

In sports—as in life—things don’t always go according to plan. Sometimes the star of the team comes down with the flu on game day. Sometimes that team that’s been running the ball all season comes out and puts it in the air. Sometimes the line-up changes and a lefty comes up instead of a right-handed batter. In sports—as in life—it’s always good to have a back-up plan.

The Advanced Exposition class wasn’t at all what I’d planned for. I was prepared to build on everything they’d learned in their previous writing classes: a process approach to writing, providing substantive peer response, portfolio assessment, and so on, but by the end of the first week I knew something was wrong. “How many of you have had a writing class at this university in the past?” I asked. Significantly fewer than half the students raised their hands. “How many of you have written revision questions before?” They looked at each other. “How many have submitted a portfolio of your work with a reflective essay?” They looked at me. Weeks worth of reading and planning went out the window.

It happens, not always as dramatically as this, of course. Usually it’s just a day when no one has read the assignment, or a moment when the bulb goes out on the overhead projector, or a group presentation day when one of the group members is fifteen minutes late to class. “Hey! We’re teachers,” I tell my methods students. “‘Flexibility’ is our middle name!” That’s why my course schedule always has a disclaimer at the top: “This schedule is subject to revision. Please check frequently for updates.”

9. Understand the power of teamwork

“There is no ‘I’ in ‘team,’” they say, and every successful coach knows it’s true. Championship teams are those that exceed the sum of the individual players’ abilities. They grow from a coaching philosophy and a team culture that values the contribution of every team member—from the most gifted to the last one off the bench. Good teachers, too, know that every student has something to contribute. The trick is to find out what it is and to create opportunities for other students to see and come to value it.

My students often tell me that “group work doesn’t work,” and they all have miserable past experiences to back up their claims. But I’m a firm believer in both cooperative and collaborative learning, and I have dozens of successful writing and learning experiences on the part my students to support my belief as well. Having written a dissertation on collaborative writing, I know that planning and implementing successful collaborative writing assignments is one of the most difficult tasks a writing teacher can undertake. I also know that as long ago as 1992, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede discovered that 70% or more of writing in the workplace was collaborative—and that was before the advent of collaborative writing software, networked working environments, and highly portable laptop computers. If collaboration is going to be a

hallmark of workplace writing, and if, as my own and other research suggests, successful collaborations yield superior results, then we do our students a great disservice if we don't ask them to collaborate in the classroom. I haven't taught a class in years that didn't have at least one major collaborative or cooperative learning experience and a whole series of low-stakes cooperative learning experiences generating a culture of cooperation and collaboration. This is what I believe, and this is what I do.

10. Be a student of the game.

I once asked my husband, who works in athletics, whether it would be possible to coach a sport one had never played. "Possible," he said, "but unless you have some playing experience, it's hard to coach a sport for a long time at a high level." Most coaches have played the sport they coach. Equally important, however, they've made a study of the game. They know their sports inside and out and, thus, they have an much deeper understanding than the average spectator—or even the average player.

*"We cannot build a nation of educated people who can communicate effectively without teachers and administrators who value, understand, and practice writing themselves," writes Carl Nagin in *Because Writing Matters. The National Writing Project, with and for whom Nagin authored that work, has long held (and has evidence to show) that the best teachers of writing are writers themselves. The NWP was also a pioneer in the "teachers teaching teachers" approach to professional development. The best teachers of teachers are teachers themselves. It's not enough to talk the talk; teachers have to walk the walk as well.**

When I teach a writing class, I write in class whenever I can, and I share what I've learned from past writing experiences with my students. When I teach a seminar for new writing instructors, I want to be able to say, "Last year when I taught English 101 . . .," so I've made a point of teaching the course on a regular basis. When I'm scheduled to teach a secondary methods class, I try to get back into the secondary classroom to teach a summer school course if I can, and I stay in constant communication with other secondary teachers through my involvement with the Illinois State Writing Project, the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, and the English Department's post-baccalaureate certificate in the teaching of writing.

All of this is not so much about "keeping my hand in" or building ethos ("I've done it, so I can help you learn to do it") as it is about life-long learning. Every time I teach a class, I learn more about how to teach the class. My research starts in reflective teaching. It doesn't end there, though. Equally important to my growth as a teacher are my professional reading, my professional writing, my involvement professional organizations, and my active participation in professional conferences. They are all grist for my mill. And my mill is all about becoming a better teacher.