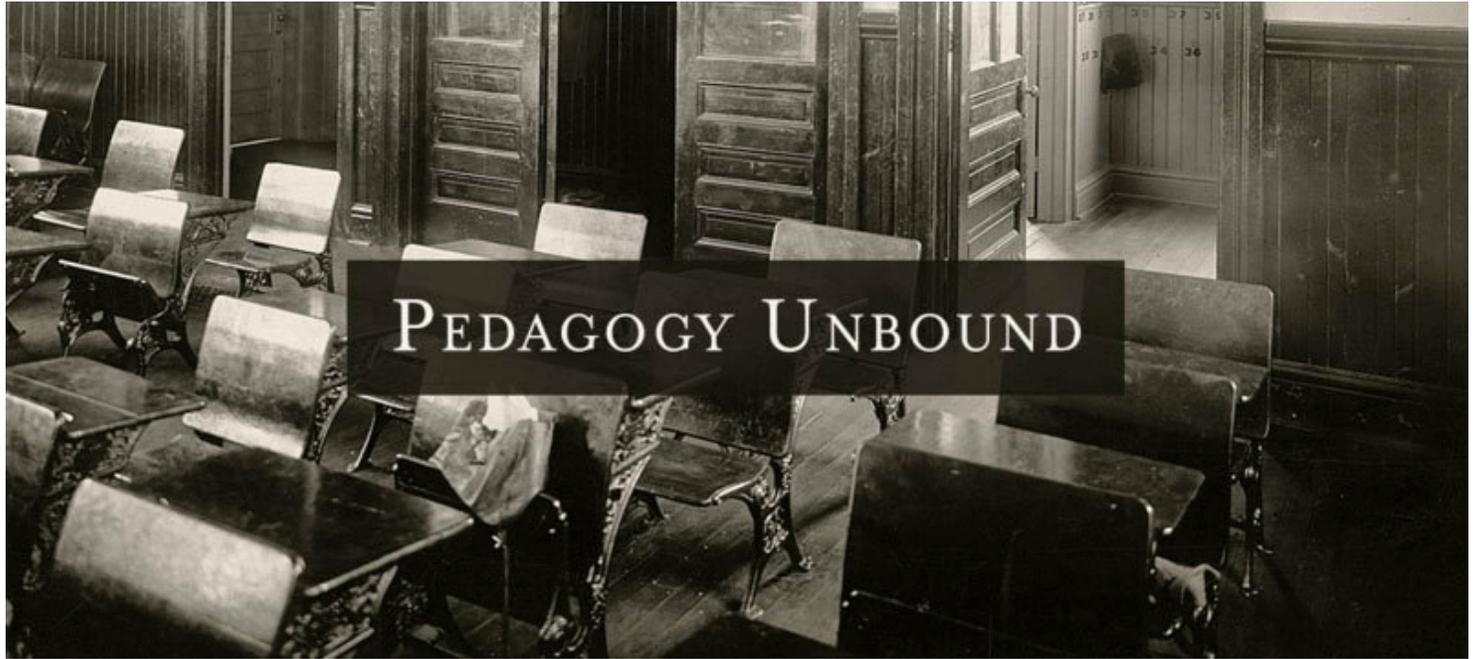


Revision Is Essential in Teaching, Too

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Writing and teaching are the two great common denominators of academic life (OK, the departmental meeting is a third). With few exceptions, no matter your discipline, you have to teach, and you have to write.

I co-teach a writing course for graduate students at the University of Iowa, and I've been surprised at how often discussions of writing evolve into discussions of teaching. It makes sense: Both involve translating ideas so they can be understood by other people. As we ease out of one semester and start planning for the next, I've been thinking about how we might apply writing strategies to our course planning.

Particularly now, when you have several weeks until the next semester starts, it's worth thinking of your courses like you think about your writing — as the result of a series of drafts. You don't expect to sit down and write a journal article in one go. Why would creating a course be any different? Acknowledge that drafting and revision are essential to any creative project and give yourself plenty of time.

Whenever I teach writing, one of my favorite texts to use is [an excerpt from Anne Lamott's book *Bird by Bird*](#). Lamott extols the value of what she calls "shitty first drafts." "The first draft," she writes, "is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later." That last aspect is crucial: Once you tell yourself that no one will ever see your draft, you grant yourself the freedom to try out ideas that you would otherwise dismiss. Isolating the composition process from the revision process allows you to turn off your inner critic when you are trying to be creative.

Try a similar process for course planning. Give yourself an hour to draft a “shitty” plan for a course you have to teach next term. Write out the sequence of topics you’ll cover. Break up important skills into components and take a swing at a schedule to teach them, one by one. Draft a new assignment that makes students get out of their comfort zone and pushes them to learn new things. Don’t stop yourself from writing something down because it’s unrealistic or might not work. Now is the time to try out new and possibly risky ideas. Plan the course the way you’d teach it right this minute, without restrictions, and see what you come up with. You have time to come back to this draft later and pragmatically revise it.

You can also trick yourself into better course planning. When I was a grad student, I turned a couple of my dissertation chapters into journal articles. I remember the painful process of drastically cutting down one of the chapters to get under a journal’s strict word limit. To make myself do it, I told myself that I could always restore the deleted sections to the chapter when I submitted my dissertation. That gave me the freedom to “kill my darlings” (and save them in a separate file) to make the chapter into a substantially shorter piece. When it came time to add those sections back to my dissertation, however, I discovered that I liked the chapter much better without them. Making those cuts forced me to trim the fat and leave only what was absolutely necessary for the chapter’s arguments.

We can enact a similar process in planning our courses. I like an exercise I came across in [a 2014 journal article](#) on “Teaching Compressed-Format Courses.” The idea: How would you teach your course if — instead of 15 or 16 weeks of multiple meetings — you had to teach the whole thing in a single three-hour class period? Sit down and plan out the session. What would you do?

You can’t possibly fit everything in, which is precisely the point: The exercise forces you to zero in on your priorities for the semester. What are the most crucial elements of your course? What would you leave out if you had to? What do students absolutely need to know? Later, when you revisit the course plan, you’ll have plenty of time to add back in much of what you decided to jettison. But I bet you’ll find that some of that material will remain on the cutting-room floor.

Finally, I want to mention an approach that I’m excited to put to use this month. Bryna R. Campbell, a Portland-based art historian, [wrote in September](#) about using [Scrivener, the popular writing software](#), to plan her courses. It’s a great idea. The features that make Scrivener such a useful tool for writing long projects — in particular the corkboard view, which allows authors to organize chapters or subsections as a collection of notecards — also make it a great tool for course planning. Campbell begins by using the software as a “brainstorming space” to organize her ideas into the weeks of the semester, and then as a repository for lesson plans and other course materials. Just as Scrivener helps authors organize a great mass of content into a readable whole, it can also help teachers rein in the chaos of a semester’s worth of teaching materials into a successful course. It’s worth [reading her piece in full](#), and trying it out yourself.

Regardless of the approach you take, make sure you give yourself time to plan. I totally understand teachers who are ready for a break after the fall semester. We all deserve it. But if you leave course planning for the last minute, you’ll make things more difficult for yourself throughout the term. Take time to draft and revise now, and reap the benefits of a well-written course all semester.

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