

# The uncertain rewards of teaching

 [blog.timesunion.com /laledavidson/2016/03/29/the-uncertain-rewards-of-teaching/](http://blog.timesunion.com/laledavidson/2016/03/29/the-uncertain-rewards-of-teaching/)

By Lale Davidson on March 29, 2016 at 7:17 PM



Jackson started speech class barely audible. A thin, Latino teen, with an Abe Lincoln beard, ear gauges the size of silver dollars, and a loose, enigmatic smile, you couldn't help liking him. If you could hear him, that is.

But the other night, hot off winning a video game tournament, he demonstrated how to play Street Fighter Five, his passion. He leaned toward the audience, core muscles taut, arms swinging, and illustrated in ringing tones the complex moves and strategies of an expert gamer.

It was the first time I saw video games as something akin to playing cello, rather than a brain-dead addiction.

After the speech, he mentioned that people had asked him to give them lessons, and I said he should charge money. \$25 an hour would be cheap compared to violin teachers who charge \$60 an hour. I could see his eyes grow big as thoughts whirled behind them.

If he does it, he'll have a learning curve. You know that idiom, those who can, do; those who can't, teach? The reverse is often true: those who do can't necessarily teach. He'll have to figure out how to break down his moves into accessible exercises to give his students, and how to help them overcome their particular obstacles. Besides pay, the rewards will be hard to claim.

Teaching at a college is a great profession: the benefits are good and the pay is okay. More importantly, it's a profession with great purpose. I feel like I'm empowering students to better their lives and the lives of those around them. But it's a hard job, especially at a community college, where we teach five courses a semester, working overtime for nine months of the year, collapsing for a month to recover and then prepping for the next onslaught.

With as much as 120 students, I read and respond to 500-800 essays a semester. Writing specific comments that provide the right balance of support and critique is an essential for learning, but it's labor intensive. It's not something a computer can do. I try to keep my response time to 30 minutes an essay, but usually, to really identify the source of a student's confusion and direct with end comments and margin comments that explain each other, it takes as much as an hour an essay, and I rarely get to see the results of my labor.

A famous study by Nancy Sommers showed that writing develops slowly over four years of college, and that many of

the changes that occur internally in the first few years don't manifest themselves until their junior or senior year.

Another challenge when you teach an interactive class where students are prompted to make decisions and collaborate, is that you have to stay on your toes and constantly adjust to students' skill levels and temperaments. And it's hard to tell why an exercise worked in one class and crashed in another. Add to that, students at community college are often battling nearly insurmountable obstacles, so you have to be understanding while still propelling them toward the goal of achieving certain standards.

I am reasonably sure, though, that in another class, where the speech topics were assigned, where the teacher lectured and the students just sat and listened (texting under the table), and where topics like video games were prejudged as unfit, Jackson would have continued to mutter and might even have dropped out.

That night, watching Jackson shine, was one of those rare moments when I got to see a student blossom right before my eyes. It's a satisfying and unquantifiable experience.

*Lâle Davidson teaches writing at SUNY Adirondack and is currently finishing her semi-autobiographical novel, The Ciphery, about life after spontaneous combustion. Her short story collection Life in the Margins, recently made semi-finalist in RopeWalk Press's Editor's Choice chapbook contest. Visit [laledavidson.com](http://laledavidson.com) for links to other publications.*