

CATE PROFESSIONAL WRITING CONTEST
FIRST PLACE, 2010

It Can't Be Done!

By Robin Lilly

Newbury Park High School, Conejo Valley Unified School District

When I was working toward my credential, an education professor of mine told a story of a character who would, at random intervals, open a door and yell, "It can't be done!" I don't recall the origin of the character, but in telling this anecdote my professor related it to the multiple tasks of teaching and how we credential students should know up front that the profession we planned to enter was impossible – that the ideals we envisioned "can't be done."

How often in my mere 6 years of teaching since have I recalled that phrase, even on occasion opening a door and yelling the words, "It can't be done!" These four words reassured me, gave me a way to acknowledge the fact that what I am asked to do – by our country, our state, my district, my school, my department, my students, their parents, and, most significantly of all, my own perfectionist self – is impossible to do completely and well. Even if I wasn't a life partner and mother of two, even if I didn't enjoy cooking and exercising and occasionally socializing, even if I fully dedicated all my time to my work, I couldn't possibly fulfill all my teaching roles to my own satisfaction. Accepting this as fact has been a consistent challenge. I pride myself in excelling at whatever I do, and it is a constant blow to my ego that I cannot be as good at my profession as I expect I should.

That said, I work incredibly hard to do the best that I can. Usually that means sacrifice, and it always requires prioritizing my tasks and roles. It is quite possible that learning to balance the various requirements of our work is the most important skill we can acquire, and once we've achieved some balance we could be possibly be called an experienced, if not effective, teacher.

The professional roles I've focused on most in my short career have been curriculum developer, mentor, and judge. Just before embarking on my first year of teaching, I was given a book called *Teaching with your Mouth Shut* by Donald Fink, which has had the most profound impact on my instructional style. Fink sold me on the benefits of a student-centered curriculum focused on student reading, writing, and Socratic seminar as the primary modes of learning. Because I'm not much of an entertainer like some of my more popular "sage on the stage" colleagues, a student-centered orientation works well for me and many of my students. I orchestrate learning, conduct the opportunities, and attempt to lead students to discover connections that are especially salient to them individually. Best of all, the students often teach me great insights; by allowing students to come up with their own interpretations of texts, my own understanding of classic and contemporary literature is continually enhanced.

However, despite my confidence and comfort with this instructional style, I always felt the curriculum was suited mainly to those students interested in literature. In my first years of teaching I led a primarily core literature-based course with literary papers (style and theme analyses) being the foundation of my writing curriculum, per the course map and guidelines given me by the school district. English literature is my content area, after all. However, as I wasn't picking the pieces or conducting the assignments that might engage a larger portion of my students, the course always felt somewhat contrived. I began to question the validity of a literary-centric course: how am I meeting the needs of all my students, particularly those who either will not or cannot read the assigned literature? How does teaching literature help anyone succeed in

life beyond a literary career? How many times did I hear students say, “How will reading this or writing that help me in my future?” I honestly believe in the ways in which the study of literature can build analytical skills, cultural literacy, and personal identity, yet I still feel those students who don’t like to read or write literary analysis papers are being shortchanged somehow by an emphasis on “English” over “Language Arts.”

Thus, my role as a curriculum designer has evolved over the past 6 years. Over time I began to focus a bit more on the “language arts” part of my content area and a little less on the English (literature) part. I researched writing feedback as part of my M.Ed., became a teacher consultant with the Cal State Northridge Writing Project, and reflected regularly on the tension between the dual purposes of my curriculum, which is both a content area in itself and a foundation for all other content areas. I have been most influenced by the writings of Tom Romano, Kelly Gallagher and others who argue convincingly for authentic learning. Reading Kelly Gallagher’s *Teaching Adolescent Writers* and *Readicide* led me to change my course curriculum to focus on more authentic reading and writing situations (and yes, the literary analysis paper is one of the genres I teach). Each year I have adapted my curriculum, and each year I see more of my students engaged, taking on the roles of real writers, writing for real audiences, and really reading texts—both fiction and non-fiction. We use our readings as our writing guides, following the philosophy touted by Gallagher: “read like a writer and write like a reader.” My evolution is incomplete, I’m sure; with more experience and practice I’ll change and adapt as new and different students and standards are put before me. However, I am confident that a broader application of my curricular goals suits more students than my original narrow, literary focus.

In addition to curriculum designer, the other roles I struggle most to balance are those of mentor and judge, which also appear at odds. On the one hand, mentors may have different methods and different expectations, but the final product is ultimately up to the student. On the other, judges have set criteria that are supposed to apply equally, objectively, and those criteria make the product ultimately up to the judge. How can I teach on the one hand, then evaluate on the other, without compromising the learning and progress of my students?

The way I experienced English growing up and the way I initially taught English did not allow for true mentorship: we get an assignment, we write, we’re graded. Where is the opportunity for guided practice? If writing were a sport, students would always be playing the championship game without any pre-game scrimmage. I have watched so many students receive papers back, look for the grade, then toss the paper aside. As a proper judge, I use a criterion-referenced grading rubric, and even when I emphasize areas where students have made improvement, some feel like they’ve lost the game when they see my honest evaluation. Students may revise papers to “practice” implementing my suggestions, but despite admonitions and instructions to the contrary, many students interpret “revise” to mean, at worst, “correct any surface errors she identified,” or at best, “rewrite this to fit what she wants,” which is inevitably different than what last year’s teacher wanted. And so, my role as judge can compromise students’ writing progress and overshadow my role as mentor.

To address this phenomena, I have changed the way I teach, assign, read, and evaluate writing altogether so practice is central to my instruction. In essence, I decided my primary role should be mentor. Judges do not teach; they evaluate and render decisions, so I grade sparingly, *judiciously*, and developed a system wherein student self-evaluations constitute a significant percentage of the course grade. Students always practice a particular writing genre before any graded assignment is given, and I coach them throughout the practice. Students evaluate their

own homework and class work, we share in evaluation of formative assessments, and I evaluate summative assignments, usually with input from the students. Students report what they're learning, where they're struggling, and how well they've met the criteria we've discussed or developed in class, and then assign a letter grade to that learning. I respond with my perception, and we meet halfway when our evaluations disagree. In this way, I'm able to use evaluation as a means for instruction and can continue mentoring students while giving students more ownership of their course grades. My grading system is still a work in progress since I continue to tweak it every term, but it has helped me in my struggle to balance the roles of mentor and judge in a way that "can be done."

I've tried many approaches to balance my roles, to reform my teaching and to meet the needs of my students. While I still frequently feel "it can't be done," I see the phrase as realistic, not pessimistic. I may never be satisfied that I am able to implement and accomplish all that I'd like, but that doesn't mean I cannot be an effective teacher; instead, I reflect, adapt, and labor to do as much as can be done.