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Making Composition-I Count: "TILT-ing" the Course to Better Aim at Student Learning

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Abstract

In this article, I briefly discuss the results of a small research study involving my Composition I students in Fall 2021. I gave the students a survey toward the end of the semester. I had implemented Mary-Ann Winkelmes's (2019) "TILT" framework in the class, focusing on the assignment design. However, I also followed (unconsciously) a teaching approach that aligns with and follows from the TILT framework and education scholar John Hattie's (2009, 2015) insights. The survey results show that the students seemed to have benefited from the strategies I introduced. I conclude by stating that pedagogical strategies such as TILT and Hattie's "visible learning" (2015, p. 79) require dedicated effort and passion on the part of an instructor. These strategies not only benefit students but make instructors better in their jobs.

First-year composition courses (FYC), often Composition I and II, are a staple of higher education in the United States. Commenting on the importance of these courses, composition scholar Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt (2018) stated that "first-year writing reaches more students than any other postsecondary course" (p. 283). In his excellent history of college writing instruction, David Russell (2002) traced the origins of these courses to the last few decades of the 19th century, noting that Harvard College made "freshman composition" a "required course" in 1900 (p. 50). The Conference on College Composition & Communication (CCCC), the leading organization dedicated to college writing, describes these courses broadly:

> In writing courses, students gain experience analyzing expectations for writing held by different audiences and practice meeting those expectations. This experience contributes significantly to the development of productive writing practices and habits of mind that are critical for success in different contexts, including academic, workplace, and community settings. (The Conference, 2015)

The Council of Writing Program Administrators, another agency concerned with college writing, has a statement of outcomes related to first-year composition courses. These outcomes include areas such as "rhetorical knowledge," "critical thinking, reading, and composing," "[writing] processes," and "knowledge of [writing-related] conventions" (The Council). The "WPA outcomes" acknowledge concerns of writing in the twenty-first century, including working with technology, use of images,

online writing, writing collaboration, and so on. Despite such carefully prepared guidelines, first-year writing courses are often perceived by students "as a chore" (Bunn, 2013, p. 496). Michael Bunn (2013) also pointed out an opposite tendency: "At the same time, many . . . students recognize the value of writing and learning to write" (p. 496). Bunn's (2013) study at the University of Michigan combined surveys, interviews, and classroom observation involving both instructors and students. He concluded that FYC instructors should strengthen their classroom instruction by making "explicit" connections between course texts and student writing, pointing out features of genres and writing strategies used by the authors (Bunn, 2013, p. 504).

As a tenure track, and, later, tenured faculty member in the English department of Georgia Southwestern State University, a small public university in Georgia, I have taught first-year writing courses for a dozen years. My experience in these courses reflects Bunn's (2013) cognitive dissonance. I have had students in these courses who are reluctant members of the class, seeming to wish that they are able to complete this graduation requirement with minimum effort and time. On the other hand, many students genuinely wish to improve their writing. What is not so obvious are students who share a bit of both ways of approach. For these reasons, I have always found these courses both challenging and rewarding. In her 2018 address as the chair of CCCC, Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt expressed this dilemma: "I see first-year writing as both the source of many . . . problems and the place where we have the opportunity and capacity to create change" (p. 276).

Doubts about the effectiveness of FYC have persistently troubled scholars in the field of college composition. In one of the most trenchant critiques, Elizabeth Wardle (2009) pointed out that students do not practice writing realistic genres in these courses and, consequently, gain little, if any, value from them. Wardle (2009) cast doubt on skills students may be able to transfer from FYC to other courses and writing tasks beyond college. Conversely, in two theoretical articles that combined activity and genre theories, David Russell (1997) and Russell and Arturo Yanez (2003) argued that FYC genres are connected to disciplinary and professional genres. They suggested that writing instructors should make these connections explicit by discussing complexities of genres and activity systems (spheres of activity, including texts and other materials) with FYC students. Similarly, Anne Beaufort (2007), a writing-across-the-curriculum scholar, asked FYC instructors to enlighten their students about learning-related writing concepts such as genre, discourse community, and rhetorical situation (p. 178). Helpfully, she also had a word of advice for students, to "become lifelong learners," adding that "the developmental process for writers never ends" (p. 177).

After the disruption of COVID-19, when I returned to on-campus teaching in Spring 2021, I taught a course called "Advanced Composition." It is an upper division course in the professional writing concentration of the undergraduate English program. The course is also taken by students from the literature concentration. In the course, my students read a popular anthology titled "The Best American Essays" and wrote short response papers and a longer research essay. Several essays were on socio-political issues and generated lively and respectful discussions in the class. For the final exam, the students were required to give a short reflective presentation in which they looked back on the course and assessed what went

well and what needed to be better. One perceptive student stated that we had not paid sufficient attention to writing strategies despite that fact that the course was about writing.

The student's criticism, genuinely felt and politely offered, stayed with me. That summer, I participated in a university workshop on a framework called TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching). This pedagogical intervention aims to make teaching (and learning) clearer and more "accessible" (Winkelmes, 2019, p. 1). For example, TILT stipulates that an assignment include a purpose statement, a detailed explanation of the task the assignment presents, and a statement on criteria to succeed in the assignment (Winkelmes, 2019, pp. 36-40). The scholar who conceived this approach, Dr. Mary-Ann Winkelmes, joined our virtual workshop on the first day. The comment made by my Advanced Composition student, along with my reflection on it, seemed to have found a pedagogical strategy in the TILT framework. As a workshop deliverable, I redesigned an assignment for ENGL 1101, a first-year composition course, using the framework. I implemented the idea more fully in an ENGL 1101 course I taught in Fall 2021. Although I used the framework in redesigning the course assignments, I ended up using a few additional strategies that align with and flow from TILT.

Purpose

In this article, I share my experiences using the TILT approach in my Fall 2021 ENGL 1101 (Composition I) course. I chose this course to implement this approach because it is an introductory writing course in college and is taken by students from different majors and some who have not yet declared a major. The course description in the university's undergraduate bulletin reads: "A composition course focusing on skills required for effective writing in a variety of contexts, with an emphasis on writing improvement. The course also seeks to strengthen critical thinking skills and the ability to read with understanding." Both tenured and untenured faculty in the English department teach Composition I and II. Beyond the course description the department leaves it up to individual instructors to decide how they will teach these courses. The departmental instructors have adopted a variety of pedagogies (lectures and discussions, "Reacting to the Past" games, workshops, and so on) and assignments (essays, podcast, website, and so on) in these courses. A minimum of C grade is required to pass the courses. Even though experienced faculty members teach these courses, the rate of students failing (getting a D or an F grade) and withdrawing from Composition I (ENGL 1101) is uncomfortably high. According to the university's Office of Institutional Research, the DFW rate in ENGL 1101 in Spring 2022 was 61% (62 students), and in Fall 2021, the rate was 35% (125 students). Moreover, this problem has been steadily worsening. In Spring 2021 and Fall 2020, the DFW rate was 48% and 31%, respectively; and in Spring 2020 and Fall 2019, it was 46% and 24%, respectively. This negative trend demands pedagogical interventions to improve the effectiveness of ENGL 1101.

In this article, I present the results of a survey I administered to my Fall 2021 ENGL 1101 class to assess the effectiveness (and shortcomings) of TILT-related strategies that I tried to improve my teaching and learning for my students. The survey had a small sample size (n = 13). Other limitations for the study include the fact that it relates to just one

university in a specific locale, and that I used only one method (a survey). Hence, I make no generalizable claims. My intention is to reflect on my experience of trying TILT-related strategies in a first-year writing course and share my experience. Besides helping me think of ways to improve this important course for students, such a reflection may also be useful to other instructors.

Methods

Participants and Research Context

Thirteen students from my ENGL 1101 class in Fall 2021 responded to the survey, administered through surveymonkey.com. The survey had been exempted from review by the university's Institutional Review Board. The course had 21 students from majors, such as computer science, pre-marketing, criminal justice, biology, psychology, education, and pre-nursing, to name a few. Because the survey focused on strategies that I had tried in the course, it was not possible to request other instructors in the department to administer the survey to their ENGL 1101 students. The main purpose for the survey was to evaluate if the strategies I had introduced in the course had helped improve students' learning. These strategies included a careful selection of writing assignments: essays representing different genres (i.e., exposition, argument, analysis, and research) and purposes or challenges (a career exploration essay, a world problem essay, and so on) to be written by the students. Composition scholar Jacqueline Preston (2015) has highlighted the importance of having course assignments in a basic writing course that are "connected to the realities in which students are already engaged" (p. 52). I designed the essay assignments using the TILT framework (purpose, tasks, criteria for success) to provide as much clarity and elaboration as possible.

To illustrate my use of TILT elements in the course, I first reproduce the purpose statement from the world problem essay assignment. Then, I describe the other sections of the assignment, including TILT elements of task and evaluation criteria.

> *This essay will help you think and write analytically about a world problem. The ability to think about larger issues will be useful to you in your career and life. Such an ability prepares you to make connections between different events or situations (e.g., between a happening across the world and its repercussions for the U.S. and its allies, or between a development in your profession or industry and events or issues related to a cultural group or a nation), to better understand the context behind an issue (because you will look for and examine related issues locally, nationally, and internationally), and to think creatively to solve complex problems (to connect ideas from two different spheres—that is, backgrounds—if they help enlighten a problem to facilitate solutions). Put differently, this ability helps you become a creative problem solver, a more engaged and informed citizen, and a compassionate and perspicacious human being.*

The purpose statement also included a list of skills—from identifying a world problem, researching about it, and analyzing the research material, to organizing and

writing the argument—which formed the basis for the task section.

The assignment task comprised a brief introduction that asked students to see themselves as a human living in the 21st century, use research to analyze and argue about their topic, and listed a few topic examples. This preface was followed by a bulleted list giving step-by-step guidance on how to approach the assignment and write the essay.

The task section was followed by a statement on helpful resources and assignment specifications. The last section listed evaluation criteria for the assignment. These were, broadly, a clearly-defined, specific world problem; five articles to support the argument (both scholarly and from news media); a well-developed argument; careful writing; and correct and complete citations.

The other three course assignments (career exploration essay, literary analysis essay, and research essay) were similarly structured using TILT elements of purpose, task, and evaluation criteria (the research essay did not state evaluation criteria but had specific topic prompts and assignment guidelines, including for revision). I added other, specific information to the assignments where I thought it to be useful. The evaluation criteria in the other three assignments listed qualities for various aspects of the essay (specific thesis, organization, amount of research, revision, integration of sources, and so on) but also included a detailed rubric for the literary analysis essay.

Besides using the TILT framework for course assignments, I followed strategies in the course that align with this pedagogical approach. Let me explain from the beginning, before the course even started. I used what I thought of as a more student-centered approach. I began my course design by mulling at length about the purpose of a composition I class. Although I had read the course outline many times, I read it a few more times to ensure that I understood the expectations underlying the course. I also read information about first-year composition courses on websites of college composition-related professional bodies (e.g., The Conference on College Composition and Communication). Additionally, I looked at information about the majors (and in a case or two, the undeclared status) of the students enrolled in the course. Because the course focuses on writing improvement, I wanted the students to write a few solid essays. Mary Jane Dickerson and Richard Sweterlitsch (2002), scholars of American Literature and essayists, described essays as "the literary form that is most available for our own continued self-education—in and beyond the college and university" (p. 70). Essays allow college (and other) writers to find "what [their] ideas are, what they mean to [them], and how best to present them to others" (p. 79). Rhetoric scholar Ira J. Allen (2018) saw first-year writing courses as dealing with "the possibilities of enacting creative capacity in a shared world" (p. 190), an apt challenge for a "malleable genre" such as essay (Dickerson & Sweterlitsch, 2002, p. 65). I devised course essays (a career exploration essay, a world problem essay, a literary analysis essay, and a research essay) based on a hope that they would appeal to the students, connecting with their concerns or desire to acquire skills. These essays aimed at the "use value" (practical purposes) for students instead of mere "exchange value" (writing for a grade) (Russell, 2003, pp. 345-350). In a TILT-related case study by Emily Daniell Magruder et al. (2019), the researchers mentioned

"assignments relevant to [students'] professional goals" (pp. 168-169).

Other TILT-spirited strategies I used included detailed classroom instruction and feedback to the students on their essay assignments (both individual feedback and summarized feedback to the class as a whole). These strategies formed the bedrock of the class. In a book co-edited by Mary-Ann Winkelmes, the scholar behind the TILT approach, Allison Boye and others (2019) stated, "In general, implementing transparency appears to foster more purposeful and reflective teaching" (p. 68). I taught in a manner more responsive to students—a way of thinking TILT encourages. I presented and discussed material from the course textbooks, including close analyses of select passages and the authors' writing strategies or generic traits (recommended by Michael Bunn in his 2013 article mentioned earlier). Winkelmes (2019) suggested "debrief[ing] graded . . . assignments in class" (p. 6), a practice I followed by discussing feedback on an assignment with the entire class—how the class did on an assignment—without naming any student (I also provided individual feedback to the students). I shared feedback on assignments with the class orally, and, sometimes, in a written form (a PowerPoint presentation or a printed sheet). The feedback I shared with the class resembled the feedback I provided individually to the students. Reading their essays closely, I commented on both broader (macro) issues and sentence-level problems. I highlighted the need to write with specificity, clarity, and conciseness; to write for wider audience; to focus on the essay's main point or argument; to think about the organizational issues in the essay; to think through a point before writing it down; to read an assignment sheet well; to introduce and cite sources; to write good and informative sentences; to revise and edit well; among other issues.

In *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, a comprehensive research review about teaching in schools, John A. C. Hattie (2009) advocated reflective and transparent teaching that engages in "deliberate practice to attain understanding" (p. 23) and "feedback provid[ing] cues or reinforcement to the learner" (p. 174). In a 2015 article, John Hattie noted that his "visible learning" concept applies "quite similar[ly]" to higher education (p. 80). In a striking insight, Hattie (2015) asserted:

The VL [visible learning] research points to the importance of ensuring that the university lecturer has the right mindset about teaching at this level. The mindset is not that students come to the class to be taught, but that the teacher comes to the class to evaluate the impact of their teaching. (p. 87)

Lastly, I also increased the amount of communication with the students in the class, who knew that I was only an email away. The TILT framework calls for enhanced communication with students (Winkelmes, 2019, pp. 5-6).

Thus, I (probably unconsciously) used the TILT approach in other ways than designing the course assignments. As Hattie (2015) pithily expressed, "Students are very good evaluators of the impact of teaching on their learning" (p. 87).

Research Design

In my focused research to find out the impact of the pedagogical strategies I had

used in the course, I decided to ask straightforward questions to the students in the survey . I did not mention the TILT framework in the questions because I was more interested in knowing how the students perceived the course overall and my deliberate choice of assignments and teaching. As explained in detail, I used the framework in designing the course assignments and, perhaps unconsciously, in my overall teaching. However, in the survey, I simply asked the students about the course, the assignments, the feedback given by the instructor, the classroom instruction, and the skills learned. I hoped to receive honest and unfiltered responses to the direct questions I posed in the survey. Because I wanted to learn about the effects—successes and shortcomings—of my "intentional and directive" course design (Hattie, 2009, p. 337, p. 147), I thought a survey-based inquiry of the students would yield useful information. However, the use of survey as the sole method also limited the findings of this study, a point I elaborate a bit more in the discussion section.

The following are the abridged survey questions, with each question followed by an open-ended question asking for explanation or details: 1) "Overall, how satisfied are you with what you learned in the course?" 2) "How would you rate [the course] essays as types of writing that will prepare you to write well in college and beyond?" 3) "How would you rank the following aspects of the course" (in-class teaching, course assignments, instructor feedback, in-class writing time, and textbooks)? 4) "With respect to your learning, how would you describe in-class instruction or teaching?" 5) "How would you rank the essays in the course?" 6) "How did you find the instructor feedback on your essays?" 7) "Rank the following writing skills in terms of how well you learned them in the course." Questions 1, 2, 4, and 6 were single-answer, multiple choice questions, with five or seven options out of which respondents picked one. The remaining, ranking, questions asked respondents to rank the answer choices in a preferential order. As stated, each question was followed by an open-ended question that asked respondents to explain their response on the previous question with a comment.

Data Collection

As stated, I administered the survey using surveymonkey.com, a well-known online survey website. The survey was made available in the last week of November, toward the end of the Fall 2021 semester. The website recorded the survey data provided by the respondents. No other primary data were collected for this project.

Data Analysis

Surveymonkey.com provides basic statistical analysis of the collected data, including actual numbers, percentages, means, and the like. The website also lists textual responses to open-ended questions. These results allow a researcher to find interesting data points, whether a number or a sentence. I read through the responses to the closed-ended (multiple choice, ranking questions) and open-ended questions (questions requiring a textual response) multiple times. Responses to the closed-ended questions were clear in their results (as stated, Survey Monkey offers basic analysis of the collected data). The textual responses took several readings, and, since they were attached to a previous closed-ended question, I compared the open-ended responses to the responses to the previous closed-ended question.

Results

Most of the respondents (8/13) were either *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with the course. Two respondents (out of 13) were "dissatisfied" with the course. A follow-up open-ended question asking the students their reasons for responding the way they did on the previous question received a few interesting responses. A student, who was *somewhat satisfied* with the course, explained his response in this way: "I learned a good bit how to improve my writing but it was not fully clear where exactly to improve or how to improve." The student comment shows incomplete communication between the instructor and the student despite my detailed feedback. Perhaps written comments on student papers need to be supplemented with a face-to-face or virtual conference between a student and an instructor. Such an interaction will help a student ask questions and seek further guidance. Hattie (2009) cautioned instructors to pay attention to how students "receive and interpret" feedback (p. 174). In one of his notable insights, Hattie (2009) declared,

> It was only when I discovered that feedback was most powerful when it is from the *student to the teacher* that I started to understand it better. When teachers seek, or at least are open to, feedback from students as to what students know, what they understand, where they make errors, when they have misconceptions, when they are not engaged---then teaching and learning can be synchronized and powerful. Feedback to teachers helps make learning visible. (p. 173)

The student in the previous comment, who liked my feedback on his writing but was unsure about how to use the feedback, informed me through his survey response that more communication was needed after I returned my written feedback to him. Hattie's (2009) quote above awakens us to an important insight that, for effective teaching, an instructor must also be attuned to potential student feedback, whether offered or—as is often a case—held back. If a student offers feedback (that is, asks questions, expresses concerns), she may do so during a term or at the end of it. The important thing is to try to reach out to students, or better still, supplement written feedback with a brief conference, where a student may ask questions or communicate any concerns. Winkelmes (2019) similarly advocated to "invite students to participate in class planning" and "help students identify patterns in their returned, graded work" (pp. 5-6).

Another student stated, "I have learned some new skills and ways to improve my writing, but most of what I have used to complete my assignments I learned in high school." Both Hattie (2009)—as can be seen in the quote above—and Winkelmes (2019) have emphasized learning about students' prior abilities or skills.

When asked how they would rank different aspects of the course—in-class teaching, course assignments, instructor feedback, in-class writing time, textbooks—the students ranked instructor feedback and assignments as the top two, respectively. In-class teaching was the third most preferred part of the course. In all, 12 students responded to this question. Four students ranked instructor feedback as the best aspect, and five students ranked this attribute as the second-best aspect of the course. As to the course assignments, two students ranked this quality as their most-liked aspect of the course, and four students ranked this area as either their number two or number three choice. The mean response for instructor

feedback was 2.17 and for assignments, 2.36. Because the rank of one was the highest, the lower the score the more the respondents preferred this option. Thus, the mean responses shown above indicate a positive preference for these options (instructor feedback and course assignments). In open-ended responses connected to this question, a student commented, "I believe the course assignments and the instructor feedback have proven to be very valuable aspects of the course."

Although I had not explicitly asked in the survey about my use of the TILT elements in the course assignments, a few student comments suggest that the assignments were understood and engaged students. To the open-ended question following a question about the course assignments, a student responded, "These essay assignments helped me understand how to write." While the student's response is somewhat vague (is the student commenting on the challenges posed by the assignments?), it is reasonable to infer that the assignment design—which used the TILT elements—helped the student write in response to the assignment. In response to a question about skills learned in the course, a student wrote, "I think the most important thing is reading the writing assignment carefully." While I frequently exhorted my students to read the assignments well, it is interesting to see that a student wrote this comment in response to the survey question. The two-part question—a closed-ended question followed by an explanation-seeking open-ended question—on skills learned included "reading assignments carefully" as a skill in the options. So it is likely that the respondent repeated this statement as an open-ended comment. However, even so, it is notable that the commenter did so, because it suggests that the assignments may have been clear and understandable to the respondent, a situation to which the TILT elements likely contributed. Two other points should be briefly noted here. One, the assignments were seen as valuable by the survey respondents (i.e., 9 out of 12 respondents found them either very or extremely valuable). Such a positive reception is unlikely if the assignments are confusing or unhelpful. So the TILT elements appeared to have played a role in the assignments' success in engaging students. Second—and this is a larger point I want to make—the TILT approach is conducive to (even influential in) a more engaged, conscientious, and student-centered teaching, a point I elaborate in what follows and in the discussion.

Another student found in-class teaching worthwhile: "The in class teaching helped me learn how to improve my writing." Eight out of 12 respondents found in-class teaching to be either very or extremely useful. One student did not find the teaching useful. The lone dissenter shows how it is important to connect with every student, as Hattie (2009) pointed out (p. 238).

What satisfied me as an instructor was learning from the students that the three main areas on which I had worked to improve the course—in-class teaching, assignments, and feedback—were the same areas that students had preferred the most. I improved the assignments after reflection and deliberation and by using the TILT framework. In my teaching and feedback, I had unconsciously followed Hattie's (2009) advice to make "teaching and learning . . . visible" (p. 25). The idea behind TILT is similar. Making instruction transparent is not different from making it visible. Both approaches involve striving to teach in the classroom; connecting with students; and aligning assignments, instruction, and course goals. In his article about visible learning in higher education,

Hattie (2015) has stated, "Any course needs to be designed so that the learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned with the learning outcomes" (p. 87).

A sketchy assignment is invisible because it fails to enlighten or engage a student. As a director of the Writing Center at the university where I work, I have heard from the consultants working for the center that it is not uncommon for students to approach the Writing Center to understand a writing assignment. But making teaching and learning visible is not limited to designing assignments carefully. I did so by aiming at "'over-learning' or fluency of achievement" (Hattie, 2009, p. 29). Explaining this idea, Hattie (2009) provided the following helpful examples: "There is over-learning when we consider a person fluent in a language or with a musical instrument, or when we consider a student fluent in math, reading, or science" (p. 30). In my in-class instruction, I was thorough, to the point where a respondent or two noted some repetitiveness on my part. A student commented, "The in-class instruction does make good points over certain common mistakes first year composition students make, but some lessons are repetitive." Two respondents connected in-class instruction to the course assignments, with one writing, "In class learning helps me understand my assignments better." Similarly, Boye et al. (2019), in Winkelmes's TILT-related volume, noted that some "faculty improved intentionality in their teaching" after implementing TILT (p. 68). Part of teaching effectiveness, as both Winkelmes (2019) and Hattie (2015) have pointed out, is linking instruction with assignments. Winkelmes (2019) has advised, "Discuss assignments' learning goals and design rationale before students begin each assignment" (p. 5). A student in the survey commented, "My instructor explains every detail before we start an assignment which is very helpful." Connections between in-class instruction and course assignments are both facilitated by a framework, such as TILT, and strengthen the framework in turn, making it more effective.

To a question about the usefulness of the four course essays—career exploration, world problem, analysis, and research—in their college education and beyond, all 12 students deemed the essays valuable. Six students chose the option *very valuable*, and three students each considered the essays to be either *extremely valuable* or *somewhat valuable*. Answering the follow-up open-ended question asking for a brief explanation for their response, a student hearteningly wrote, "All of these essays were out of my comfort zone and by completing them it helped explore my writing potential for classes to come." Another student pointed out, "The topics cover a wide variety of writing types and this is extremely valuable." Such perceptions by students about course assignments may seem like a minor step in the right direction. However, it would be good to consider a question posed by composition scholar Jacqueline Preston (2015) in relation to such student perceptions: "In what way do assignments assist students in producing writing that has consequence—self-development and sociocultural change?" (p. 53).

A student connected the course to his or her major: "The world problem essay and research paper are valuable because I will have to write similar papers in my major." As has been noted, the assignments in my course aimed to get students to think about different issues and skills (career, world issues, textual analysis, research). As I have also alluded to, before the course began, I decided to prepare course assignments that had some use value for students, as opposed to generic essay

assignments (e.g., write a five-page argument on a topic of your choice) that seem pointless beyond the purpose of the class.

When it came to instructor feedback on the course assignments, 10 out of 12 respondents found it either *extremely useful* or *very useful*. The feedback spoke to the assignment specifications and guidelines, including evaluation criteria (argument, evidence or specific details, clean and flawless writing, to list a few qualities). I did not make a conscious effort to match my feedback to what appeared in the assignment documents. However, I sensed (and knew) that my feedback was consistent with what the assignments asked for. No student raised a single question pointing to any inconsistence between my feedback and the assignment guidelines.

Hattie (2009) called feedback "the most powerful single influence enhancing achievement" (p. 12). However, even substantial feedback may sometimes not work if it is just a one-way traffic—from a teacher to a student. A framework such as TILT, or a pedagogy advised by a scholar such as Hattie (2009, 2015), exhorts teachers to involve students in their learning, to ensure that the feedback is understood fully. Returning graded papers is not the end of feedback, for there may be unasked and unanswered questions. A student in the survey commented, "The feedback was useful most of the time, just the few instances where it was unclear." No student in the course approached me with a concern that any part of my feedback was not clear. I don't mention this as any note of satisfaction on my part. Heeding Hattie (2015) and Winkelmes (2009), I would like to hear from my students their questions about the feedback I return on their papers.

Discussion

First-year composition courses remain challenging for a variety of reasons. Students taking these courses often feel that they are being forced to check off a requirement that they do not really need. I have frequently heard from my students that they learned the FYC content in high school. However, over the years, I have discovered that this view is at best only a half truth. Students in the courses I have taught often struggle to write well-developed expository, argumentative, or narrative prose. They write in generalities and are often uninterested in or unaccustomed to revision. A few students in these courses are skilled writers, and their presence in the class sometimes makes one think that they need not be in the class in the first place. An important caveat to this description of many FYC students is that they vary widely. In my own career, as a graduate student and then a full-time faculty member, I have seen significant differences in these students with respect to their writing skills. Another factor to consider about these students is their willingness to learn. Despite the contradictory attitudes many FYC students have toward these courses—as noted by numerous composition scholars—I have always found a sizeable majority of them to be eager and enthusiastic to learn, at least at the beginning of a term. This eagerness and enthusiasm should be leveraged by FYC instructors.

As writing scholars, such as Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt (2018), Ira J. Allen (2018), Michael Bunn, and, before them, David Russell and Arturo Yanez (2003), have suggested, FYC remains a "space" (Calhoon-Dillahunt, 2018, p. 276) of opportunity. This opportunity is not just in terms of college education (though this is the core area), but also in civic and global arenas (the latter envisaged in the 2017 CCCC Statement on

Globalization in Writing Studies Pedagogy and Research).

At the risk of sounding obvious, let me say that taking advantage of the opportunity space FYC offers will not be easy. Hattie (2015) has argued that college students "need to be deliberately taught" (p. 79). He has succinctly pointed out that "successful educators actively practice the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)" (2015, p. 80). For example, according to one of Hattie's (2009) salutary insights, "when feedback is combined with effective instruction in classrooms, it can be very powerful in enhancing learning" (p. 178).

The TILT approach is a practical intervention for deliberate, strategic, and fulfilling college instruction. Perhaps it is a commonplace thing to say that being an educator is a calling. Scholars such as John Hattie (2009, 2015) and Mary-Ann Winkelmes (2019) have shown that this characterization is not a commonplace but a challenging truth.

As Hattie (2009, 2015) and Winkelmes (2019) have suggested, FYC instructors can benefit from listening to their students, whether in individual conferences or through a survey. Hattie (2009) recommended that teachers remain alert for "formative" feedback of their actions in the classroom (p. 181). The survey that I gave to my Fall 2021 ENGL 1101 class surprised me because of the specific responses or comments of the respondents. Part of this specificity was attributable to the specific questions I asked. It may be worth mentioning here that it is not common to hear such responses from FYC students. On occasion, I have tried to invite feedback along these lines only to be met with unyielding silence. Hence, getting ENGL 1101 students to share their thoughts about the course in a concrete, sensible manner is a welcome development. I take these responses as a sign of the course's success due to the influence (both conscious and unconscious) of the "TILT" framework.

At the end of the Fall 2021 semester when I sat down to grade ENGL 1101 essays, I felt disappointment. Seeing that students had repeated some of the problems I had worked hard to get them to overcome felt like a defeat. If such repeated attempts over the past few months could not succeed in making them more careful writers, how would they become more accomplished writers in future semesters and after completing their college education? Although there had been some noticeable improvement, a few more essays that I genuinely liked than was usual for this course, their responses to the survey I gave them felt a bit unreal. (The students' final grades showed more *As* than I had given in this course in a long time.)

However, if we remember intricate theoretical connections exploring writing development of college students made by Russell (1997) and Russell and Yanez (2003), and Beaufort's (2007) reminder that writing continues to develop over a lifetime, we will not be disheartened with small "defeats" during a semester worth of instruction. We also need to see our instruction through our students' eyes, as Hattie (2009, 2015) and Winkelmes (2019) have suggested. I want to end with a couple of reflections, one about the use of TILT and the other about this small study's limitations.

Neither Hattie's (2009, 2015) counsel nor the TILT approach can work by itself. Implementation of these ideas requires time, effort, passion, and persistence. I will

continue to use the TILT approach not simply in assignment or syllabus design but holistically, combining Hattie's (2009, 2015)'s insights. I also plan to use these ideas in other courses besides FYC. Ultimately, approaches, such as TILT, and Hattie's "visible learning" (2015, p. 79) help not just students but instructors, too. College instructors do a difficult job, in which rewards are rarely quick and often invisible. The ideas and approaches discussed in this article can have an ameliorative impact on college instructors' professional lives. These statements have even more relevance for writing instructors for many reasons discussed in this article and debated by composition and professional communication scholars.

I wish to acknowledge that a focus group or a few interviews would have given more in-depth responses, affording me an opportunity to ask for clarifications and follow-ups. However, because the survey was administered toward the end of the course, there was little to no time for more detailed inquiries. Both a small sample size (n = 13) and a single research method (a survey) are limitations of this study.

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