

## **Pedagogue Bonus: Advice to First-Time Teachers (w/Nancy Sommers)**

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, Nancy Sommers joins us to talk about teaching and advice she would give to first-time teachers. I remember meeting Nancy as an MA student at a workshop on campus and this was before I began teaching. I knew her work because I read it in my pedagogy class and during my time in the writing center. Once I read it, I knew I wanted to study teacher response. I wanted to be...I wanted to be Nancy Sommers. We met and she was incredibly kind. She asked me to email her during my first year of teaching. She wanted to hear my thoughts and feelings being in the classroom for the first time. I was over the moon. She's always interested in what I'm doing. I'm really thankful for her.

Nancy Sommers led the Harvard College Writing Program for 20 years, directing the first year program, establishing the Harvard Writing Project, and leading a series of research studies about college writers. Sommers now teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she leads writing workshops and mentors new writing instructors. She's the co-author of four writing textbooks, including *A Writer's Reference* and *A Pocket Style Manual*. Her article, *Responding To Student Writing*, is one of the most read and most cited articles in teacher response research and writing studies.

*SW: Nancy, thank you for joining us. I want to know what you would say to a first-time teacher. What advice would you give them? Before they ever step foot in the classroom, before they ever met students, before they began developing their own teacher identity, what's one piece of advice or maybe multiple pieces of advice that you would give that first-time teacher?*

NS: I would say lucky you! You are so fortunate to be going into a classroom for the first time. It's exhilarating and it's also exhausting. It's exhilarating and exhausting in equal measure, so take care of yourself.

I would suggest to a new teacher that come the first day, create your class as a community. Do whatever you would do to make your class a community of readers and writers because our process pedagogy really depends upon students wanting to work together as readers and writers. Peer work, for instance, doesn't work if students don't trust each other. I, right from first day, have students working in groups, doing different things in groups, getting to know each other, getting them to feel as if we are a community together and what happens, and I say this to students, what happens in our class can only happen because they are there. The most important thing on Tuesday and Thursday at 11:00 is not for them to be checking their email or not for them to be texting, but to be as present as they can in that classroom and participating because we need them. I want students to really feel their presence matters.

I would say remember that you are a writer, too, and remember why you chose to teach writing, and remember why it's a calling that has called you. Because I think sometimes when we get in the midst of teaching, we forget our roots and we forget how much we love to write.

For a new teacher, it's really important to think as a writer because I think we write different kinds of comments when we teach as a writer. We're less judgmental. We're more compassionate. Teaching as a writer really helps us to join our students and understand their struggles and their pleasures. But I think it's also great when you've framed an assignment and crafted it to try to write it yourself. You may not have time to really think about it with great length, but what happens when we write our own assignments or write to our own assignment prompts as we start to see what kinds of problems students will have and we anticipate those problems in ways that we don't if we just think of the assignment as a piece of writing that we've done.

I also would say to a new teacher, whenever you have crafted an assignment, go backwards and say to yourself, "What would a student need to know how to do in order to successfully do this assignment?" Because our assignments are complex and they're asking students to juggle a lot of skills. If you don't teach those skills, then what happens when you respond is, as one of my colleagues once said, we're responding to our own bad pedagogy.

I like to look at an assignment, go backwards, say, "What skills would a student need to have? What would a student need to know in order to do this assignment?" And make sure I've scheduled into the class all of the things that need to be covered in order for a student to successfully do this assignment.

I would also say that it's very easy to become overwhelmed and think that you need to teach 12 different things each class day because you think, "Oh, there's so much to cover. I have to teach everything." Instead, what I would say to a new teacher is teach one lesson each day because if you can teach one lesson and teach it well, that's a lot of lessons in a semester. There's just a lot of value in really slowing things down. Especially, we talk a lot about wanting to help our students be close, and careful, and slow readers. Well, it's hard to be close and careful readers if everything in the classroom is moving too fast. Think about what your values are. What do you care about as a writer? How are you going to breed that into the classroom?

I'll give you an example. For instance, I love beautiful sentences and I want my students to write beautiful essays but also beautiful sentences. But I didn't think I was doing a very good job with that. As it turned out, this semester, my class was scheduled in the ugliest possible classroom. There's a lot of construction going on and not enough classrooms. Here we were in this ugly classroom.

I decided that instead of calling the room, Room 315, we were going to call it the Gallery Of Beautiful Sentences. Students were assigned on a rotating basis to write on the blackboards. That's the one thing we have had, blackboards on three sides of the room. Students were assigned to write what they found as beautiful sentences in the readings and they could write one, two, three sentences on the board. Then at some point, we talked about what made these beautiful sentences and how they worked in the essays.

What I found was students became better close readers because we focused on the sentences and how the sentences were. Then towards the middle of the semester, they started writing their own sentences on the board. I think it just had this wonderful effect of having students think more about sentences and how sentences work, and paragraphs and how paragraphs work in essays. That to me is an example of thinking about, well, you can't teach everything, but what do you want to teach? How will you teach it well?

I would suggest to a new teacher, think about what you value in writing and how will you teach it? See learning through the eyes of your students rather than say, "They're not getting it," or "They're not doing it," or whatever it is you're trying to teach. Inevitably, we all feel frustrated when we think we've taught something and then, for whatever reason, that teaching, that learning didn't happen. See it through the eyes of your students. Why are they struggling with learning what a good argument is? Why are they struggling with summarizing or paraphrasing sources? Why are they struggling with asking a good research question? See it through their eyes. I think that opens up a whole new way of teaching.

I would say to a new teacher, use a handbook. I used the handbook the first time I taught and I still use it. I think it's important for students to have a writing handbook because it gives them a resource to turn to, it says to students, studying writing is important. Here's a book. This book will travel with you throughout your college career.

The last thing I would say to a new teacher is have a great time. Be yourself. That's what I love about teaching is that my voice, my voice on the page is the same voice in the classroom. I'm a Jewish mother. I feed people. I bring cookies to class. You just have to be yourself. You can't imitate somebody else. The voice in the classroom has to be your own voice.