Last lectures: Some final thoughts after teaching my last course

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Prologue: Contexts for teaching

Last Fall term I taught what will almost certainly be my last class as a university instructor. It was fun--the students were fun, lively, challenging, and the course evaluations were excellent (4.9/5.0). More importantly, I felt like I did well.

I handled the class well: it was a course outside any academic program (Business Communication), so it could not have been a requirement or even part of a program. The students, consequently, were from all over, took the course out of interest or time-slot compatibility, and ranged from traditional undergraduate age to people re-entering the university as a way of retraining for a second or third career. Although it was a second-year course, several first-year students second language students signed up and stayed, despite my warnings that it was a writing course and not a language-learning course. In short, it was a challenging group of students to teach, with diverse needs, language resources, and backgrounds.

As an instructor, the course was based on ten years of work writing a case-based textbook for learning business communication skills. Each week had a component of lecture material made available before class that was worked through in class, and each week had group discussion and pre-writing activities done in groups in class. Outside of class we used the Game of Writing software we developed here to facilitate and encourage peer review of drafts of the documents students wrote. Our research on teaching with that software shows us that it works, and that data was corroborated by students in this course. In short, the materials were excellent and tailored to my teaching strengths, and the software was also designed specifically to push students to develop critical thinking skills in the context of peer review of writing.

My research on learning to write (and writing to learn)

In the field of Writing Studies, pedagogy and research about teaching has always been a core concern. My own publications show this concern from early in my career to now:

"Student Commentary on Teacher Writing: A Case Study." *Values and Evaluation: Proceedings of Inkshed V.* St. John's: Memorial University, 1989. 49-61.
"Student Reactions to Teacher Commentary: What do students say, and how do they say it?" *The English Language Arts Bulletin* 30 (Spring/Summer 1989): 43-50. Co-authored with Carol Galletly, Carole Papper, and Gerald Nelms.
"Teaching Composition Theory in Canada." *Composition Studies* 23 (Fall 1995): 110-114.
"Meeting the Audience: Responses to Student Writing from Service Learning Clients." *Business Communication Quarterly* 64 (2001): 55-62.
"Undergraduate writing assignments: An analysis of syllabi at one Canadian college." With Theresa Hyland and Boba Samuels. *Written Communication* 27.3 (July 2010).
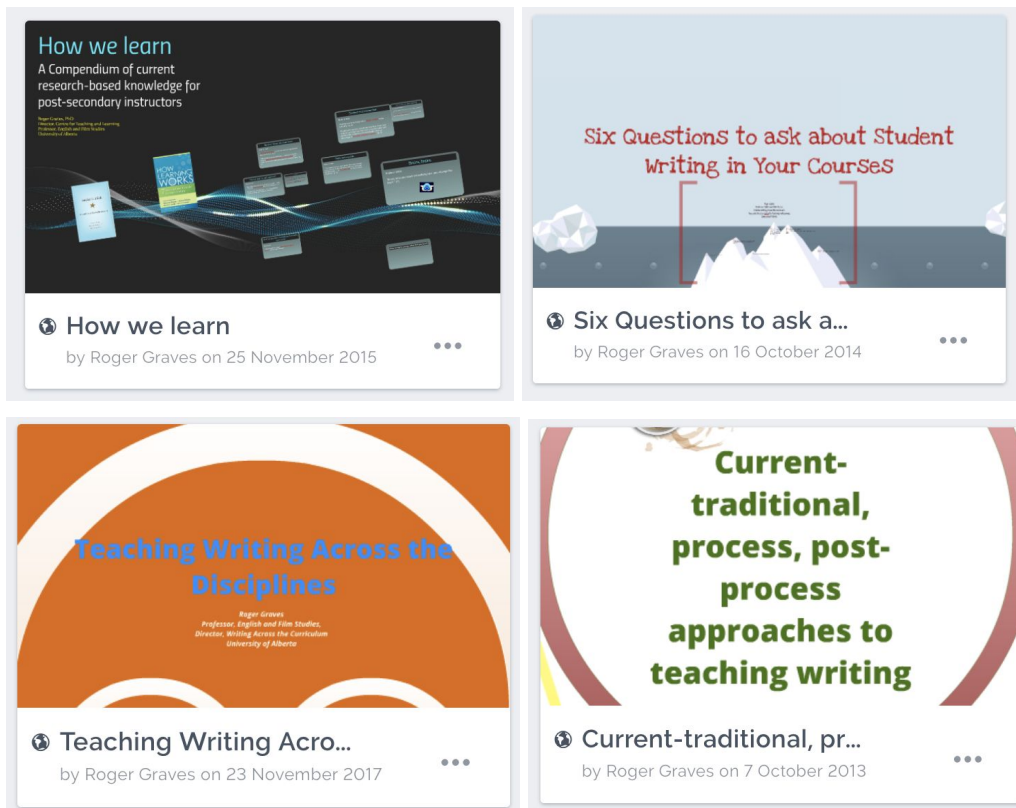
Kresta, Suzanne, John Nychka, Jacob Masliyah, and Murray Gray. "Writing Well[2]: Building Traction and Triumph into co-Authorship." *2011 conference of the American Society for Electrical Engineers*, Vancouver BC.

Andre, Jo-Anne and Roger Graves. "Writing requirements across Nursing programs in Canada." *Journal of Nursing Education* 52.2 (February 2013).

Slomp, D., Graves, R. and Broad, R. (2015). "(Re-)Mapping the System: Towards Dialogue-Driven Transformation in the Teaching and Assessment of Writing." *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 60 (3): 538-558.

Graves, R. & White, S. (2016). "Chapter 26: Undergraduate assignments and exams." *The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes*. New York: Routledge.

Some core philosophies throughout this work include 'writing is a social act and action': we're always writing to somebody for some purpose. And as you can see from the list above, very often we are writing with others-- 'writing is a collaborative act.' Further to these precepts, I think writing, as seen as a tool of literacy, can be applied to social problems (through service learning, for example). Writing is also a way of learning more generally--not just as a tool or method but as epistemological (creates knowledge) and ontological (brings knowledge into being).

Learning theories

I've summarized some recent research on learning here:

https://prezi.com/bynu7c8sbb8-/edit/#4_24309637

How we learn
by Roger Graves on 25 November 2015

Six Questions to ask a...
by Roger Graves on 16 October 2014

Teaching Writing Acro...
by Roger Graves on 23 November 2017

Current-traditional, pr...
by Roger Graves on 7 October 2013

Some highlights from the research from *Make it Stick*:
- "Trying to solve a problem before being taught the solution leads to better learning."
- "When you space out practice . . . retrieval is harder . . . but the effort produces longer lasting learning and enables more versatile application of it at a later time." (p. 4)
- "We are poor judges of when we are learning well and when we're not." (p. 3)

In various ways we've incorporated aspects of these principles in WRS 102: Writing in the Disciplines. We try to set challenges/assignments that are a stretch but within reach for most students. We require students to work together to improve the learning of other students but also themselves. We require students to apply what they are being taught, read what others have written when trying a similar challenge, and then revise based upon feedback and their own reflections.

Teaching strategies

Over the decades of my teaching career (1981-2017) I've learned a lot about teaching, including taking a BEd, and this course really allowed me to use the best design and performance strategies that I had developed. Here are some of them:
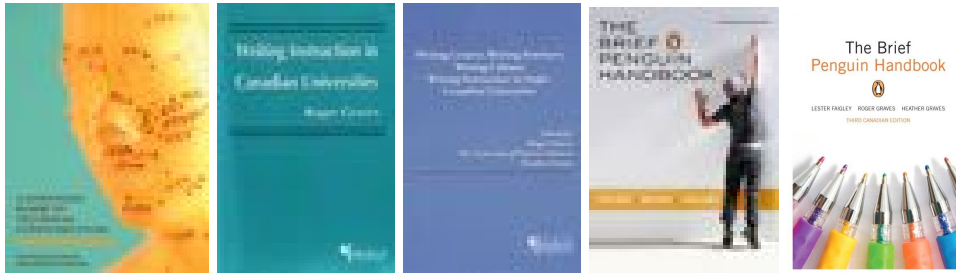- Use "active learning" strategies such as in-class discussion and problem-solving sessions
- Require students to work in groups to ensure that all students leave class with a shared understanding of the material and with a clear understanding of the work they should do before the next class
- Provide clear grading rubrics/criteria throughout the course
- Use online technologies to communicate with students between classes and to share documents and learning materials
- Know each student through their writing and help each of them progress

Connection to my own learning history

One value I have in teaching a course is that it should be useful outside the context of the course itself--that is, students must see how they can use the knowledge and skills developed in the course later or concurrently in other contexts. This comes from my reading of John Dewey's work many years ago and from my own experiences as a co-op English major from 1976-1981, where I spent work terms at IBM and Imperial Oil and academic terms reading Shakespeare. Another value is that students can contribute an enormous amount to a course, and we need to find ways to bring that out of them and use it to improve learning. Peer review of student writing does that, and it worked exceptionally well in this course. A third value I have is that when a group of people go to a room to learn together, they will learn more if they work actively together: they can't be just sitting there and listening. In-class activities, including discussions in small groups, are an essential part of my learning methodology.
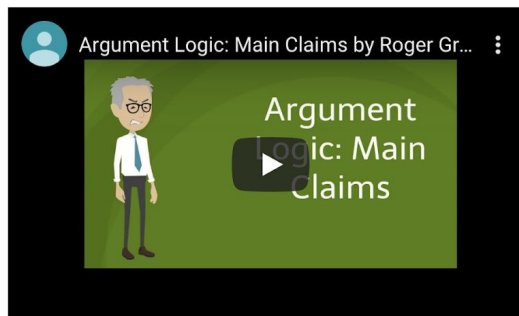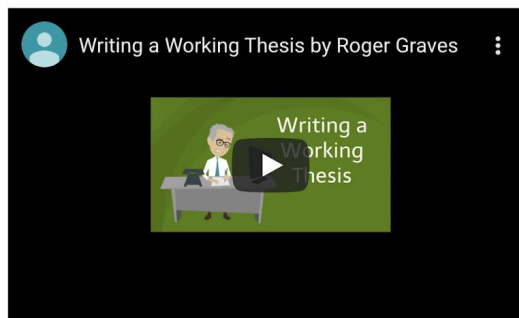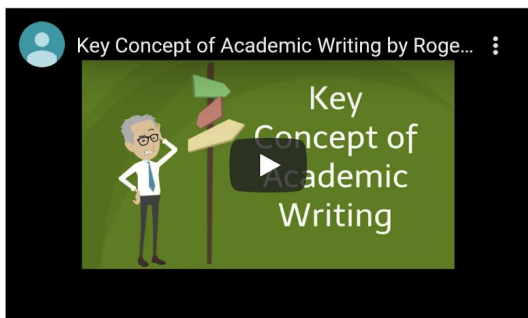
Attempts to help students

In addition to these articles, I've also co-written writing textbooks and handbooks over the past 15 years as well as research books.

I've also created videos on YouTube:

https://www.ualberta.ca/centre-for-teaching-and-learning/resources/wac/students/videos.html

Key Concept of Academic Writing by Roge...

Key Concept of Academic Writing

Writing a Working Thesis by Roger Graves

Writing a Working Thesis

Argument Main Claims by Roger Graves

Argument Main Claims

Argument Logic: Main Claims by Roger Gr...

Argument Logic: Main Claims

How to give Good Feedback about Writing

4:30

How To Give Good Feedback About Writing

1.5K views • 1 year ago

All of these various multi-media attempts are kinds of teaching, most of which we don't usually consider to be teaching (we tend to name it by the media it uses). Each different medium offers different ways in to the material, offers different ways for students to learn. The textbook explanations are detailed and lengthy; the video provides voice and tone.

Attempts to help instructors

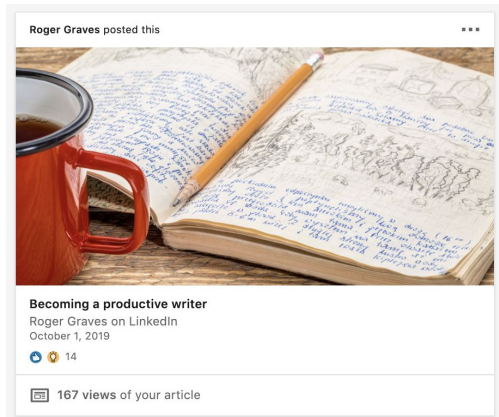My podcast has over 30 episodes and 20,000 listens from over 40 coutries:

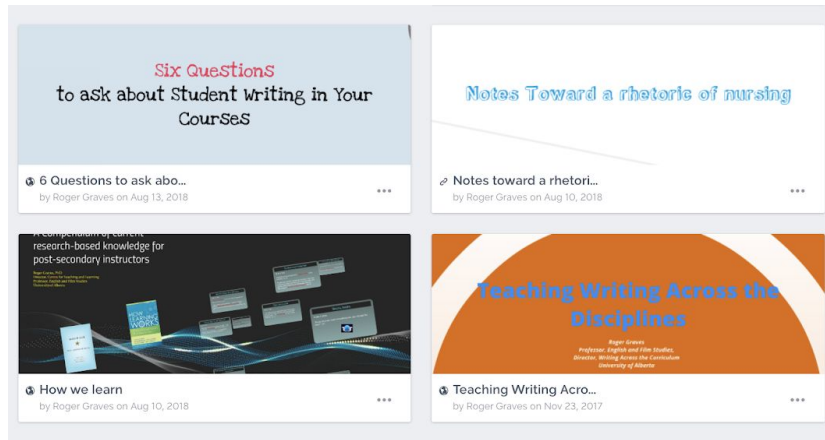My non-university website has over 500 uniques visitors last year:

My LinkedIn articles have been read over 500 times:

My Prezis have been viewed thousands of times:

People are finding value in what I've decided to share. It seems to me a good way to move toward the end of my teaching career: sum up what I know and share it with whoever might find value in it.

My future
My philosophy about teaching includes a desire to continually find ways to share what I know using whatever technological means available, and through those technologies to build community and understanding of how people can learn to write. I imagine my attempts will continue beyond the end of my academic appointment in June, 2020, at least as long as I continue to learn more and desire to share what I learn.

February, 2020

References
Brown, Peter C. (2014). Make it stick : the science of successful learning. Cambridge, Massachusetts:The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press*.*