

Learn Their Names

I never had control over the courses I taught until I learned the students' names. Addressing students by their names signals that you recognize and value their personhood. You are in an I-Thou relationship with them—they are not the means to execute the purpose of your job, but the purpose itself.

The students who speak in this text are not named. I will explain why. At first I was going to people the classroom with names from an old Chicago phonebook, but discovered that introducing an “Arthur” or “Genevieve” called for me to give them appearances, personalities, and write histories for them, like a novelist would. I did not want to take the novelistic approach because I intended to write nonfiction—a teaching memoir. I wanted to share with readers what it's *like* to be a teacher by commenting on the profession and my experiences in it. I also wanted to bring readers into the classroom so I could share the subjects I love to teach.

Another approach I could take was to use the appearances, personalities, and histories of students I have taught. I did not take that approach because preserving the sanctity of the classroom is paramount. The stories my students told are their stories, and their voices belong to them alone. Therefore, except in a handful of special cases, the student stories told in this book are made-up, as are their voices. On the other hand, everything I say that happened to me did happen to me.

True, the students depicted here share demographic characteristics with the population I have spent the most time with—working class, mostly white and Christian, community college students from rural Mid-Missouri. But the nameless voices you read here come from different places. They are composites of students. They are the voices of putative readers. Missouri sometimes speaks through them; other times, their voices emerge from a place just outside of my conscious awareness. Wherever their voices come from, they share with my real students the predilection to mess with their cell phones all the time.

When I separated the student voices from the voices of real students, the community college changed as well. Freed from having to depict

historical reality, I conjured a community college for these unmoored voices to attend, Booneslick Community College. At Booneslick, I imagined I taught a humanities class called English Infinity, not Language and Literature 101, 115, 116, 140, 141, 150, and 151 that I had been teaching for years.

I started each chapter with a topic in mind and followed digressions as they emerged organically from these commentaries and conjectural classroom scenes. Student voices had the liberty to speak in either case. New material is presented here alongside material I have taught for years, as anything can fit into the curriculum of English Infinity.

So how is this a teaching memoir if the students' voices are not voices of students I have had, the community college doesn't exist, and the course I am teaching is a metaphysical postulation?

This book is a teaching memoir of the first time I taught English Infinity to the students in my mind whose spontaneous voices I transcribed. The text is, in a sense, a series of live classes that follow the microcycle of a teaching year and the macrocycle of a teaching career.

So while the interlocutors in these chapters are students in a textual sense only, through our interactions I hope to convey the warmth, energy, and inspiration I experienced with students I have been privileged to teach through three decades in the classroom.