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Writing Outside the Lines

My students want an answer. They want a template to follow: guidelines, outlines, herd lines. And, why shouldn’t I give them one? I am the teacher, after all, and in the simplest form, my job is to provide a clear set of “do this”s and “not that”s for my students to mimic until they can mimic real life and pretend their way through adulting. I mean, what’s the worst that can happen?



That’s not even a rhetorical question, but one I can answer. If I give my students a template, the worst that can happen is simply this—they become successful adults. If I teach them to follow the rules, to color in the lines, then they will be able to succeed in this black-and-white society. They will graduate. They will do well in college. They will work and marry and pay taxes and vote (actually, not vote. The norm now is to *not* vote, and a template teaches them to be the norm) and do everything correctly. Isn’t that my main function as an educator? I am supposed to produce students who are “college and career ready.” I am supposed to produce citizens who maintain the social order. And, why not? That’s who I am. I am the high school graduate who succeeded in college and works in a fulfilling job and married happily and pays taxes faithfully and votes (well, thinks about voting and has an opinion but then usually doesn’t because, well, I’m the norm) and does everything correctly. Except give my students a template.



And, why not? Why is it that I simply refuse to give them a fill-in-the-blank? Would their papers be better with one? Yes. Would they be less stressed and, in turn, like my class more? Probably. Would I still fulfill the core requirements of this course? Yes.



And yet, here I am, wallowing in my bias—hypocritically, too. I esteem myself as teaching beyond the template, as if this is some holy calling of mine to make students struggle on their own. And, yet, I follow the template. Am I giving them more than what I had or simply dooming them to a blank future? If I don’t give them a template, will they know where to go from here? Will they leave my class and create a future or simply spin around and around on the wheel of *Life* waiting for some player to move their peg to the next colored square? Am I actually hurting them in my self-righteous commitment making them think?



But really, shouldn’t that be the template? What if the template was simply a “1- question, 2-search, 3-explore, 4-understand” process? Would that process produce students who succeed, or simply questioners who fail to conform (no, not “conform.” They would see that word as negative. But that’s my job: produce people who can conform to the requirements needed to succeed. And that’s not a bad thing. I want them to succeed. I want them to graduate and work and marry and almost vote. Conforming isn’t bad. Failing is.)?



And so, I write. I sit here and write this template-not template because I want them to succeed and they want a guideline and I can’t just give them one because, well, I just can’t. And maybe this example will ruin them—their creativity, choice, own voice—as they mimic me. And maybe it will do nothing but make them successful. But for some reason, them being “successful” just doesn’t quite feel like enough. Not to me.

