

REBECCA SEMIK

rebecca.semik@gmail.com • 480.277.4047 • rebeccasemik.com • linkedin.com/in/rebecca-semik

Screenwriting

It's supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it.

—Tom Hanks in *A League of Their Own*

My entire education career has been blessed with some of the best educators around. And when I contemplate what made each of them so great, a trend starts to emerge. The most influential teachers in my life were the most challenging, the ones whose grades never came easy, the ones that expected nothing but our best effort and best work because they knew we could rise to the occasion. But this expectation was complemented by a complete dedication to their students, going above and beyond to give more of themselves than asked, in their tireless work ethic to help us learn about their subject and about life. It is this collection of teachers-turned-mentors that inspire my own philosophy of teaching. It's difficult to sustain the level of extraordinary dedication to students and teaching I've witnessed from my own teachers. And it's challenging for students to rise to great expectations when they're conditioned to do the bare minimum. But if it were easy, everyone would do it.

As for me, I accept this challenge as a teacher and hope to inspire my students to greatness by adopting four major tenets in my screenwriting pedagogy: practice, inquiry, engagement, and compassion. How I conceptualize the screenwriting workshop classroom is equal parts student-centered and equal parts teacher-center, what I like to call 'teacher-centered' (a good sense of humor is also critical to this classroom model). When I meditate on my major pedagogical tenets, I think in terms of the themes that relate to both sides of the educational line (albeit in unique ways) and that relate on many levels (from being a student of this class to being a citizen of the world).

First, as a class, we will **practice**. Students will learn by doing. Their practice is the application of course concepts. They can study all the screenwriting books in the world, but nothing will teach them the craft quite like practicing it. The workshop setting gives them an abundance of feedback on their work but also the opportunity to practice giving thoughtful feedback to their peers by applying their new knowledge. It's the best way to grow as a writer and learn what works and what doesn't. Just as the students learn by doing, I teach by doing. Teaching for me is like meditation; it's a regular practice, and the practice of teaching is the practice of offering knowledge and facilitating discussion, of offering feedback on assignments and performance.

Second, we will **inquire**. In the words of Nancy Willard, "Sometimes questions are more important than answers." I emphasize this because critical thought and inquiry lend to higher order thinking, a universal skill set that extends beyond screenwriting. In workshop, we look at examples of produced films and analyze their successes and their failings. I ask questions like what's the story about, who's the protagonist, what are the stakes, why do we care about this story, drawing them into analytical thinking. I lean heavily upon the Socratic style of questioning so they may learn the questions they can start asking each other during workshops and themselves as they sit down to write. Students direct their inquiry predominantly to the scripts they read and write, whereas my inquiry is focused on constantly asking how my teaching and their learning can be improved, what works and what doesn't. My questions lead me to innovations such as creating an engaging course [website](#) that serves as a more attractive, more easily accessible repository than simple emailing. Moreover, I designed a script writing checkpoint calendar using a method of scaffolding that incorporates metacognitive and critical thinking mini-assignments, which aids in breaking down the task of writing a script.

Third, we will **engage**. Workshop discussion groups are communities. Participation is key. Engaging is vital. To learn best, students must be present, physically and mentally, and they must contribute. I hope by students engaging with the material and each other, they ultimately share their perspectives with the class because each one is unique. To promote this sharing, I create multiple opportunities for low stakes small group activities and a learning-by-teaching model to increase students' ownership of the class. Low stakes small group activities, especially in the first classes of the semester, allow students to interact in a way that's free from the

intimidation that comes from having to immediately dive into receiving criticism about a personal creative work, but it also allows them to access prior knowledge and brainstorm new script ideas with peers. Something as simple as students sharing industry articles or informally presenting their class writing process self-reflections to the class creates the learning-by-teaching model. It not only generates new process ideas for the class but also garners a greater sense of empathy. For me as a teacher, the tenet of engagement extends beyond the classroom to me mentoring students as my predecessors did. In doing so, I give students open lines of communication to give me immediate feedback on the course and how I can better adapt it to their different learning styles. Through approachability grounded in mutual respect, accessibility grounded in flexible office hours, and rapport building grounded in taking a genuine interest in my students, I create and sustain long-term student-teacher relationships.

Finally, we will be **compassionate**. In a workshop-oriented setting, giving and receiving criticism is the name of the game. But students will learn to give and receive with respect for the entire class. By establishing a class culture of compassion, generosity, and kindness, students are free to create and to learn without fear of ridicule and judgment because they learn to expect reciprocity. While screenwriting is my area of expertise, I seek to teach for the school of life, imparting lessons and attitudes that will have lasting positive effects. That's why I create this safe creative space where students experience psychological safety. To accomplish this, I meet students where they are—each student will be in a different place with their writing skills but all will be challenged to grow beyond themselves. Then after establishing compassion for their peers by establishing ground rules for conduct, I remind them to always have compassion for themselves. Having creative work scrutinized will always be daunting, but I firmly believe that self-compassion in the face of vulnerability is something worthwhile they can take with them long after college.

With these four tenets of my screenwriting pedagogy, I strive to help my students succeed in my class, in their greater film careers, and in life. By the end of my classes, students should have an increased understanding of script writing and good storytelling. With this new knowledge, whether they decide to be screenwriters, their film careers will benefit. As future writers, directors, producers, editors, or filmmakers, they will have a keen sense of quality storytelling that will lend to better portfolio reels and better opportunities. But I want my passion for screenwriting as a creative art to encourage students to think of my class as not just something they have to write scripts for but rather as a way to express themselves, as a way to delineate personal connections, as a way to discern what it is they have to say with this one life of theirs. Instilling this growth mindset and a sense of personal development are just as important to me as their ability to write a script; screenwriting is merely the avenue in which I distill this.

Implementing my philosophy involves total transparency (of expectations, syllabus, schedule, rubrics, website, communication) and total authenticity (by sharing my background, my personality, and my passion for teaching; by being interested in them, not interesting to them). The first week of class, I have students answer a short questionnaire to get to know them and their goals for the class, allowing me to target my teaching. I assume they will have high expectations of me (as I do for myself) so I hold them to equally high standards; grades won't be handed out, but there will be opportunities for extra credit for extra work. I set students up for success, providing abundant resources and helping them establish growth goals for the semester. Because class time will be full, I like to take a blended approach, giving student films to view outside the class to meditate on. In the spirit of serving my students, I also like to have students answer evaluations regarding their section and my teaching at mid-semester to determine any immediate course corrections that can be made. And finally, to reinforce my tenet of compassion, I like to end classes with "Be kind to one another" in the words of Ellen DeGeneres.

My professional growth philosophy for my teaching career involves constantly seeking new opportunities for continuing screenwriting/filmmaking education and new resources to share with students, including attending lectures of prominent screenwriters like Robert McKee, joining teleconferences with ScreenwritingU, participating in the online Screenwriters Summit, and attending conferences like Austin Film Festival. Just as important is continuing to grow in the professional film industry, including submitting to and attending film festivals, networking, and producing my own writing and films. Additionally, I attend workshops like those offered through the Center for Teaching and Learning at Boston University—where I was also a cohort member in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Scholars Program—to further my knowledge of pedagogy.