A Conversation with Michael Booty

> **BACKGROUND.** Described recently by one of his students as the "best teacher I ever had," Michael Booty began his higher-ed academic career in 2002 at the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton. He was originally hired as the manager of the writing center, and was appointed three years later to the English faculty. Booty graduated from high school with a GED when he was still in the 10th grade. But instead of heading straight to college, he earned his living over the next eight years in a variety of occupations before making up his mind—when he was 24 years old and disenchanted with his job as a waste treatment specialist—to enroll in the Creative Writing Program at Arkansas Tech. After earning a BFA in the late 1990s, he spent a year teaching junior and senior-level writing at a high school in St. Vincent, AR. He then returned to Arkansas Tech, where he earned a Master's Degree of Liberal Arts in English and Writing in 2000. During his 13-year tenure at Morrilton, he has not only taught a wide range of writing courses but has also been called upon to create several courses that have become a fixed part of Morrilton's curriculum, the most notable of which is a technical writing course created expressly for the school's technical degree program.

You're about to go into your 15th year as a writing instructor, so it would be interesting to find out which specific aspects of writing instruction you have found it necessary to emphasize the most throughout your teaching career.

The two that come to mind immediately are process and structure. What I mean by process is the actual steps that students go through when they write. Structure has to do with whether students are giving careful enough thought to the organizational pattern of the essay as a whole—and, in particular, to the content and organization of the supporting paragraphs.

Why do you think it's been necessary to stress those two aspects?

What I have found over the years—especially in the developmental and Comp 1 classes I have taught—is that even though most students have been hearing about "process writing" since grade school, their approach to the writing process is nonetheless to wait until the last day before the assignment is due and then see if they can dump all their ideas on paper in one sitting. I've also found that a high percentage of students come into my class without having as yet developed the critical thinking skills that underlie the ability to organize their thoughts logically into an essay and to organize their ideas logically into the supporting paragraphs.

How, in general, have you gone about emphasizing the importance of process and structure?

It starts with what I *don't* do, which is to assume that as long as I do nothing more than to make students aware of the importance of process and structure, they will somehow learn through osmosis how to apply those concepts to their own writing. I recognized early in my career the need for a course model that would pretty much *force* students to not only go through the writing process one step at a time but to give careful thought to what needs to be accomplished in during each step.

What does that model look like?

It starts with making sure from the start that the students understand the basic course requirements and what, specifically, they need to do in order to fulfill those requirements. The students, in other words, need to have a clear idea from the start of what I'm going to be paying attention to the most when I'm grading the papers. Once the course begins, I take students step-by-step through each of the three main sections of essay—the introduction, the supporting paragraphs, and conclusion--with my main goal being to make students more aware than most of them are of what needs to happen in each of these sections in order for the essay to be successful.

What specific methods do you use to achieve that goal?

I do a number of things. For one thing, I usually limit what I cover in each of these early classroom sessions to a single concept. And I use a variety of methods to get the students to more than simply *understand* a concept but also to be able to recognize in their own writing when they're putting that concept to proper use and when they're not.

Can you give some specific examples of those methods?

Most of it comes down to varying your methods. So If the topic we're covering is, say, the thesis statement, I'll often begin the session with an overhead slide of a lead paragraph in which the thesis statement is color coded, and I'll sometimes have students color code the thesis statements on a handout with several essay leads. That way, I can get students involved both visually and manually in what I'm talking about. I'll also have students do exercises in class in which they're actually writing thesis statements, and we discuss as a group why one thesis statement works and why the other doesn't. I follow more or less same routine for each individual element of the essay. And I do my best to make these sessions as interactive, as relaxed, and as lively as possible.

What sort of instruction do you offer once the time comes for students to actually start writing their essays?

I don't do nearly as much *direct* instruction while students are writing their essays as I do when we're covering the specific components of an essay.   What I try to do instead is to shepherd them through the process once stage at a time—constantly reinforcing the concepts we covered earlier in the course.

How does that "shepherding" unfold?

It's a combination of frequent feedback and what I like to describe as "tools for critical thinking.' I want to make sure, first of all, that that the topic that each student has selected something is not only meets the requirements of the assignment but is also a topic that the student is interested—or, better still, passionate. But rather than be prescriptive and assign a topic, I leave it up to them to decide, based on a few simple questions they can ask themselves, the whether topic they chosen will meet the requirements. When students go through the planning stage of the process, I provide them an Essay Template Plan.

What does that template look like?

It consists of boxes that represent the three main sections of the five-paragraph essay and three sub-sections in the supporting paragraphs section. Each box contains explicit explanations for what the content in each of those sections needs to convey in order for the argument in the essay to be presented effectively. It also includes suggestions and questions that help students decide for themselves if, in fact, they what they've written satisfies those criteria. The students submit that plan to me before they write the first draft. Once I've approved the plan, they write their first draft and get feedback on what they should be focusing on during the revision state of the process.

That sounds like a pretty labor-intensive process.

It is! But one of the things you accept as being part of the territory when you teach writing is that you're going to be spending a significant chunk of your "out-of-class" time reading over and commenting on student papers.   The problem in my case is that, like most full-time writing instructors, I teach several courses during a semester. So, once it came time for my students to submit their papers to me, I'd often find myself staying up weekday nights until all hours of the night so that I could return the papers with my feedback as promptly as possible.

Was that your main reason for setting up the arrangement you now have with NetTutor—to ease that workload?

For the most part, yes.   At the same time, though, I wanted to make as certain as I could that even though the feedback on my students' first drafts wasn't coming directly from me but from one of the NetTutor tutors, that students were still getting whatever help and suggestions they needed in order to revise those first drafts in a purposeful and focused way. And the one thing I wanted to avoid, above all, was to create a situation where, for whatever reason, the feedback students were receiving from one of the NetTutor tutors conflicted with either the instructions of the assignment or with a concept that I had covered in class earlier in the term.

How were you able to gain those assurances?

What it came down to do mainly was my being able to communicate to the NetTutor tutors the specific role I wanted them to play in my feedback process. I wanted them to understand that their job was not to keep in mind that they were look at draft—and not a completed essay. So their job, as I saw it, was not critique the essay in as a whole but to go through each section of the essay and determine whether content in each section of the essay-- the lead, the supporting paragraphs, and the conclusion—met the criteria spelled in the Essay Template Plan. The tutors had to understand as well that it wasn't enough to simply point out the problems in that first draft. They also had to offer constructive suggestions on how to handle those problems in the revised draft.

How long did that process take?

Not very long at all. What made this preparatory process easier than it might have otherwise been were two things: The first was that I was able to provide the tutors with a specific set of guidelines—and also with the Essay Template Plan. The second is that NetTutor's "Rules of Engagement" protocol lends it exceptionally well to what I was hoping to accomplish with the arrangement.

How has the arrangement worked out so far?

It has worked out well. For one thing, I'm now able to do something that I had great difficulty doing before, which was to set a specific deadline for students to submit their first drafts without having to be under so much pressure to return my critiques as promptly as possible. I also find that I'm a lot more productive during the lab sessions that I schedule once the students have received the critiques of their first drafts. I'm able to access the tutor critiques online and, by doing so, identify those students who may need more help than others—and then work with those students on a one-to-one basis.