

English 500 at Case Western Reserve

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The course I teach is a seven-week summer seminar called "English 500: Theories of Applied Rhetoric." It is required of all new teaching assistants who have had no teaching experience at the college or university level. The course is supplemented by an advising system for all new graduate assistants. For the first two years in our program, each new assistant must choose a teaching advisor from among the full-time faculty. The advisor observes him or her in the classroom and advises about things like grading, course policy,

classroom methods, and the inevitable human and administrative problems that academic flesh is heir to. Thus, our "500" is part of a more comprehensive program of teacher training; it does not bear the burden alone.

The length of our course puts some obvious constraints upon its content. Though we can cover a relatively broad spectrum of material in seven weeks, we cannot deal with anything in great depth nor expect extended research. Thus, the course, as I teach it, has a more practical than purely theoretical focus. I try to expose my students to as much current composition theory and research as is feasible; but rather than studying new theories for their own sake or trying to examine all of them, I try to concentrate on materials that I think will have the most direct classroom application.

Our course has no particular theoretical "slant." Though I am not opinionless, I am not a strong advocate of any particular new school of composition theory. I simply try to make my students aware of as many options and alternatives for teaching composition as I can in seven weeks. While they are at Case Western Reserve, as well as when they leave us, our graduate students usually get teaching experience in several different programs (sometimes at several different schools). Few can (and few would wish to) escape teaching a broad spectrum ranging from extremely well-prepared freshmen, to foreign students for whom English is a second language, to some very basic writers. I try, therefore, to make readings and assignments that encourage as much versatility and adaptability as possible. The texts I require are Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, Harvey Wiener's The Writing Room: A Resource Book for Teachers, Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition (Donovan and McClelland, eds.), The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook (Tate and Corbett, eds.), E.D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, and W. Ross Winterowd's Contemporary Rhetoric. This may appear a rather too hefty reading list for a seven-week course. But I do not assign every page of every text, and I like to think that most if not all of these books will provide a useful core library for a continuing teacher.

The class meets in seminar twice a week, two hours each session. At the second class meeting I give students two "classes" of their own: one relatively advanced section and one developmental. These classes are two sets of xeroxed student papers: 12-15 Advanced Placement-level students' essays and 8-10 developmental students' essays, selected carefully to include a broad spectrum of beginning writers' problems. These classes are the focal point of the rest of the course, the context in which we discuss any particular theory or approach.

Though I am not at all sure the unexamined life is not worth living, I am convinced that the unexamined course is not worth teaching. Thus in the first week, I try to get my students to think about what they are actually trying to do, what their purposes are as writing teachers and what they are trying to achieve. I ask them to give me a written statement of their goals and intentions in a semester's course. Usually they write general, flowery, unfocused statements that at worst can have an idealistic, Miss America Pageant ring to them. (I will ask them to rewrite this statement of purpose before the end of the course.) Using our hypothetical classes, I try to get them immediately to think about purpose in terms of particular individuals at a definable stage of development as writers (their classes in any given year) and achievements in a finite amount of time (so many weeks, so many class days, etc.). In my experience, early chapters in Shaughnessy bring people down to earth and reality very quickly and provide an excellent example of definition of goals and development of assignments to meet the needs one finds, not the needs one expected to find.

In the second and third weeks of the course we work closely with our classes, diagnosing major problems (learning the idioms of diagnosis), and beginning to discuss curriculum and particular theories of composition in this context. The kind of question I want them to begin to ask automatically is not "Would the Christensen method work?" but "Will it work for my particular group of students?" "Would it be better (or worse) for my developmental students?" "How might I change it or adapt and combine it with other methods?" In class we discuss issues like these and reexamine our xeroxed student papers in this context. At this time I ask my students to try developing some specific assignments--for problems with sentence structure, basic grammar, paragraph development, full-length essays, etc. We discuss their examples. In my experience, Wiener's first three chapters provide an excellent set of examples of assignments in a series that build on one another and are linked by a greater plan which they help execute. Students do not need to agree with Wiener's plan to appreciate the value of thoughtfully planned sequences of assignments. Winterowd's introduction to the major sections on invention, form and style, have also seemed useful at this point. At the end of the third week I ask my students to prepare a set of readings and assignments for two weeks worth of classes.

In the fourth and fifth weeks I give my students a sort of anthology of sample syllabuses from our department. We discuss their course plans for the two week period and then get to some extremely practical matters: course policies, testing, grading, and "editing" students' writing. I usually have our ESL expert talk to my class at this time, to familiarize them with the subject and with current work being done in the field. We spend at least one whole session in group grading. Most of the time is spent analyzing the bases for our decisions and reactions. My students always have more anxiety about grading than any other facet of teaching. Quite a bit has been written about evaluation of student work, but most that I am familiar with address possible fears and problems for students. In my experience, beginning teachers have easily as many fears and problems and in general a very difficult time adjusting to playing the role of grader. I will be delighted for advice from anyone about good books or articles that directly and sympathetically address the problems the new teacher faces.

The sixth week is the most important in the course. At this time (the assignment has of course been made well in advance) I ask that my students present for discussion two complete syllabuses, which specify or clearly imply a course plan. They must present one syllabus for the better prepared students, one for the developmental. Each syllabus must contain a paragraph-length statement of the purpose and scope of the course; a list of texts (inexperienced teachers need only state the kind of text: handbook-workbook, rhetorical reader, etc.); a clear statement of policy about practical matters like late papers, cutting, bases for grading, etc.; and some relatively specific indication of the sequence of topics, readings, and assignments (no one is required to provide a literal day-by-day plan unless he chooses to do so). Each student provides enough copies of the syllabuses for the seminar, and we discuss, question, and critique each carefully.

For the final week we draw back from particulars and discuss issues raised by E. D. Hirsch in his Philosophy of Composition. The final writing assignment is a short (5-7 page) critical paper in which I ask students to critique one of the major approaches to teaching composition detailed in the assigned readings.

Two postscripts are important. The first is that the above description of my course is a description of the most recent version of it. When I first taught it, I focused much more directly on composition theory alone. My decision to move more decisively in the direction of these texts and this kind

of assignment has been motivated in large part by the expressed wishes and obvious needs of my successive classes. I do not have a good sense of what other programs do, but this is what our people seem to want and need most, and I believe it is sound for us. The other point is that the order of assignments and especially discussions I have sketched out above is the ideal I try to follow. I do not always succeed, and I feel strongly that any teacher of a course like this must reserve the right to change the emphasis or divide the limited amount of class time as circumstances and the needs of a particular group of students dictate. This, I suppose, is only stating the obvious.

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