Identifying Situational Factors for Your Course

English 297: The Teaching of Writing in the Secondary Schools

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Specific Context of the Teaching & Learning Situation
English 297, The Teaching of Writing in the Secondary Schools, is an upper division class taken by English Education majors in the semester immediately preceding their student teaching. The class meets two days/week for 75 minute periods. The optimum class size is 18. Although this is a face-to-face course, it includes some online components, including a class listserv, a webboard, and a required electronic portfolio.

Expectations of External Groups

Society has high expectations for high school English teachers. Once they have their own classrooms, these students will be expected to act as “experts” in areas as diverse as punctuation and puberty. They will be expected to have a deep and broad grasp of their content area; to be up-to-date in their pedagogical approach; to serve as sounding boards for teachers in other disciplines with questions about student writing; and more. Most especially in terms of this course, the students—once they become classroom teachers—will be expected to be able to work with a wide range of developing writers, successfully moving each to the next level of development.

The profession of English teaching also has high expectations for these students. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has determined a long list of standards, categorized as “knowledge, skills, and attitudes,” which teacher candidates must meet before they are certified. The complete list is available on the NCTE web site, and those most relevant to this course include:

**ATTITUDES** for English Language Arts -- Through modeling, advisement, instruction, related experiences, and assessment, the program promotes and strengthens professional attitudes needed by English language arts teachers. As a result, candidates

- demonstrate a respect for the worth and contributions of all learners;
- engage in reflective practice and pursue continued professional growth and collaboration with colleagues;
- take informed stands on issues of professional concern;
- recognize the impact that culture, societal events and issues have on teachers, students, the English language arts curriculum, and education in general;

**KNOWLEDGE** of English Language Arts -- The program prepares English language arts teachers who are knowledgeable about language, literature, oral, visual, and written literacy, print and non-print media, technology, and research theory and findings.

Candidates demonstrate knowledge and skills in the use of the English Language. As a result,
Candidates...show the various purposes for which language is used.

Candidates demonstrate knowledge of the practices of oral, visual, and written literacy. As a result, candidates...use writing, speaking and observing as major forms of inquiry, reflection, and expression;...use the processes of composing to create various forms of oral, visual, and written literacy;...use writing, visual images, and speaking for a variety of purposes and audiences;...apply knowledge of language structure and conventions to creating and critiquing print and non-print texts.

Candidates demonstrate their knowledge of reading processes. As a result, candidates...demonstrate how to respond to and interpret what is read in different ways;...demonstrate how to discover and create meaning from texts;

Candidates will demonstrate knowledge of different composing processes. As a result, candidates...produce different forms of written discourse;

Candidates demonstrate knowledge of research theory and findings in English Language Arts. As a result, candidates...use major sources of research and theory (i.e., books, periodicals, reports, proceedings of professional conferences, videotapes, electronic and non-electronic data bases) to understand the relationship between research and practice;

The state of Illinois also has a wide range of expectations for English teachers, but there is significant overlap with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected by the professional organization, and students who can meet the expectations of NCTE can generally pass the state examinations required for certification without significant trouble—certainly without additional preparation.

Finally, both the English Department and the English Education program have expectations for teacher candidates. The departmental expectations are set forth in a document entitled “Goals for the Major in English.” Those goals most relevant to this course include:

**Rhetoric**

Students will be able to

- recognize and name techniques that effective rhetors use to persuade their audiences
- articulate the importance of rhetorical situation to analyzing any text
- understand how ideology functions in everyday life, including the ways that commonplaces inform our collective understanding of logic and persuasion
• articulate the functions and effects of language choices—both their own and others’
• perform rhetorical analysis on written, oral, and visual texts
• compose effective rhetorical arguments.

Language

Students will be able to

• understand correctness as socially constructed, with registers as socially situated, with dialects as resulting from social separation, with variation as arising along the parameters of age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic group, etc.
• understand the complexity of grammar
• advocate for the equal viability, systematicity and worth of all human languages and dialects.

Writing

Students will be able to

• write effectively, creatively, and imaginatively in a variety of media and in a wide range of writing situations
• construct logical and persuasive arguments using appropriate evidence
• draw connections among complex ideas and synthesize ideas in creative ways
• be familiar with the kinds of technology that will allow them to produce, engage, and manage electronic and printed texts in the workplace.

Research

Students will be able to

• select and evaluate a wide range of appropriate resources for English Studies
• formulate an effective research strategy for finding relevant information for research projects
• engage new material in textual, visual, and aural forms
• evaluate and synthesize new information and ideas into their projects, giving appropriate attribution to their sources
• make decisions about the purposes for sharing research
• demonstrate understanding of the ethical and legal uses of intellectual property

The **English Education program’s** expectations for students enrolled in English 207 are articulated in a set of shared outcomes designed collaboratively by the several faculty who teach the course. Designed to (1) ensure that the course meets the expectations of external groups and (2) ensure continuity among sections taught by different faculty members with different pedagogical approaches, the set of shared outcomes are articulated as follows:
In keeping with the NCTE/NCATE standards indicated above, it is our goal that students will emerge from *The Teaching of Writing* prepared to start teaching writing in middle school or high school English classrooms. Thus, the course is designed to help prospective middle school and high school English language arts teachers better understand their own and others’ writing processes, apply various theoretical and pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing, plan writing lessons and units, respond to and evaluate students’ writing, and become reflective practitioners who are informed about issues in the field and know how to pose good questions and investigate possible responses.

Specifically, by the completion of English 297, students will be prepared to
- understand and apply to the teaching of writing their knowledge of writing processes and major theoretical and pedagogical approaches (NCTE 3.2.2; 3.3.1; 3.3.2; 3.7; 3.7.1)
- create effective writing assignments, lesson plans, and units for instruction (NCTE 3.1.8, 3.2.2; 3.2.3; 3.2.4; 3.4.2; 3.7.1)
- examine, evaluate, and select resources which support the effective teaching of writing (NCTE 3.1.8; 3.3.1; 3.3.2; 3.4.2; 3.7.1)
- help their secondary students find, develop, and refine: topics, audiences, purposes, genres, and strategies for writing to meet their own goals (NCTE 3.4)
- help their students learn to respond usefully to each other’s work and assess the peer responses when preparing to revise (NCTE 3.3.1; 3.4)
- respond to students’ writing so as to help writers succeed in the specific project and develop as writers over the long term (NCTE 3.1.8; 3.2.4; 3.2.5; 3.3.1; 3.3.2; 3.4.2)
- assess student writing in consistent, meaningful, and appropriate ways (NCTE 3.1.8; 3.2.5; 3.3.1; 3.3.2)
- incorporate writing to learn activities into the teaching of English and other subjects (NCTE 3.1.8; 3.2.2)
- identify questions and problems related to the teaching of writing and seek answers and solutions through textual and classroom research (NCTE 3.1.8; 3.2.2; 3.2.4; 3.3.1; 3.3.2; 3.4.2; 3.7.1)
- read about, write about, and discuss current political and social issues relevant to the teaching of writing, such as meeting the needs of diverse learners, students’ right to their own language, perspectives on grammar in the teaching of writing, the use of technology in the classroom, and trends in writing assessment at the local, state, and national levels (NCTE 2.5; 2.6; 3.1.8; 3.2.2; 3.2.3; 3.2.4; 3.2.5; 3.3.1; 3.3.2; 3.4.2; 3.7.1)
- act as resources for teachers in other disciplines who wish to integrate writing into their classrooms, promoting effective instruction in interdisciplinary and WAC programs (NCTE 2.3)
- become active members of the professional organizations most relevant to their teaching and continued professional development (NCTE 2.3; 3.7.1)

In addition, students will have gained, through experience, an increased confidence in their own ability to write for colleagues and other professional audiences. (NCTE 2.3; 2.5; 3.4; 3.4.2; 3.7; 3.7.1)
**Nature of the Subject**

The teaching of writing is a primarily cognitive subject which has undergone significant change in the last few decades, starting with a major paradigm shift in the 1970s. At that time, the field began to move from a *product approach*, with its emphasis on student texts, to a *process approach*, which emphasizes the processes by which texts are produced. Even more recently, the discipline has been greatly influenced by the emergence of 21st century literacies and the emergence of multiple *new media*, each offering its own rhetorical challenges.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of secondary classrooms—and many, if not most, community college and university writing classrooms—are still mired in the pedagogical practices of the last century. This represents a significant challenge for English educators, charged with forging a new generation of teachers. (See “Special Pedagogical Challenge” below.) Still, there is a widely—if not generally—accepted body of “best practice” in the teaching of writing, and this must be the emphasis of the responsible methods course.

**Characteristics of the Learners**

The vast majority of students enrolled in *The Teaching of Writing* are traditional students—21 or 22 years of age—in their final year of college. While some of them work part-time jobs, almost uniformly they would identify themselves as “students” with other responsibilities as opposed to “parents” or “employees” who are also going to school. The students are also fairly uniform in their professional goals: to become teachers of English at the secondary level. Of course there are a few exceptions—those whose dreams are to write, for example, and whose parents have urged them to get their teaching certificates as a “back up plan”—but most plan to teach high school English, if only temporarily before pursuing graduate degrees that will allow them to teach at the college or university level.

Interestingly—and challengingly—their shared interest in secondary education often grows from other shared characteristics—a deep appreciation for literature, for example, and sometimes (but less often) a deep appreciation for writing. They also often share learning styles that have made them successful in school. Their primary “intelligence,” for example, is generally “verbal-linguistic,” one of the intelligences most often rewarded in school. Thus, they often had positive high school experiences themselves; and that manifests itself in a willingness/desire to return to the secondary school “and repeat the experience “on the other side of the desk.” Ironically, many of them are the products of very traditional literature/writing pedagogies, and they have internalized not only the skills and kinds of knowledge privileged by those pedagogies, but the pedagogies themselves. (See “Special Pedagogical Challenge” below.)

**Characteristics of the Instructor**

The instructor for ENG 297 comes to the course with nine years of experience teaching English in the secondary schools and more than twenty years of experience teaching writing and the teaching of writing at the college level. As an English teacher in the secondary schools, she was something of an “odd duck”—coming to the profession out of a love for writing and the teaching of writing rather than out of a love for literature and the reading of books (although she shares that passion as well; it just wasn’t her primary motivation in becoming a teacher). She also has a doctorate in composition and rhetoric, so she is well versed in not only “best practice,” but also the theoretical underpinnings that inform the teaching of writing in the 21st century. For that
reason, she has a deep commitment to practice informed by research and theory and a deep belief that all teachers need to be—if not producers of research, at least consumers of research—and that they need to be able to transform theory into practice in ways that are appropriate for the students they teach.

One particular area of weakness for this instructor is a lack of experience teaching underserved or under-represented students, particularly in high-needs schools. This is an area that needs to be addressed in the near future, possibly through involvement in the TEACHER-PLUS, initiative at Illinois State University.

**Special Pedagogical Challenge**
The most common pedagogical challenge in *The Teaching of Writing* stems from a combination of several circumstances described above. Because the students tend to have done quite well in their own high school English classes, and because those classes were often mired in out-dated pedagogies, these teacher candidates are often operating from a body of misguided assumptions about what constitutes “good” writing instruction. Thus, the challenge for the instructor is to challenge those instructions in a non-threatening way, and the challenge for the students is to accept that challenge and move beyond their own assumptions toward more widely effective pedagogies. Only when those challenges are met can “meaningful and important learning” take place.