

ENWR586: TEACHING WRITING AND THE BASIC WRITER

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EMILY J. ISAACS
OFFICE HRS: MON 11-1, AND BY APPT.
EMAIL: ISAACSE@MAIL.MONTCLAIR.EDU

DICKSON 465
WWW.MONTCLAIR.EDU/WRITING

Course Overview

First and foremost this course is an introduction to theories and practices of teaching writing in middle and secondary school, and in college. The course aims to provide a base knowledge of the principle research, theory and practice that ground the discipline that has traditionally been defined as “composition and rhetoric,” and is increasingly called “Writing Studies.” Second, the course introduces pedagogies that support basic writers. The term “basic writer” is one in a long series of terms used to describe those students who are, depending on how you look at it, either “behind” their peers in writing, or have been identified as so (rightly or wrongly), most frequently by a “high-stakes” assessment. Often these students are from historically marginalized populations—people of color, immigrants, second-language speakers, nontraditional students, and people who are learning disabled. There is much controversy and discussion in both the mainstream press and among teachers over what “to do” with such students, and most of the discussion is ill-informed, and it’s occasionally xenophobic or racist. For that matter, much of what is said about teaching students how to write and the “literacy crisis” is similarly bad and uninformed by research and theory of how it is that people learn to write. Nonetheless not all students are the same, and teaching basic writing students of all sorts is an important part of the work that good writing teachers do. Thus this course is aimed to provide you with the knowledge requisite to be an able teacher of writing to *all* students.

Considering the similarities and differences between highly skilled writers and basic writers has fueled much discussion in the field, and is also a good place for us to begin. Why are we—English majors, teacher-types--able to write well? Did we learn to write well because of or despite what we were taught? And how do we assume others will learn to write well? What are our operating assumptions? These are important to know because our assumptions guide our practice, inevitably, and the extent to which our assumptions are valid is central to our abilities to teach writing.

Most teachers teach from their own experience as students. This is a tendency I want to question, and ultimately persuade you to resist. All of us in this class, by virtue of being in a literacy graduate program, are not representative of most students. We like words, books, expression, and analysis. We’re good at it, and have been complimented on our work in language. I suggest, however, that if we want to be effective teachers for most of our students, and if we really want to be good teachers for those students who are least like us—the basic writers in our classes—then we need to forget about ourselves and our own love for writing and teachers and all those positive experiences. We need to figure out how people very different from us might best learn to develop as writers.

To begin this class I want you to suspend your beliefs for a bit, and listen to others—primarily those writers and teachers we will be reading. You will be reading a lot this semester (about 150 pages a week). Most students who have taken this class with me before end up saying that teaching writing is a lot more complicated than they thought.

For three reasons you will also be writing frequently:

1) I want you to “experience” the process-writing approach to teaching writing that I am advocating. I am striving to give you a new set of writing experiences to add to your current portfolio of writing methodologies. I want to prove to you that there’s more than one good method for developing your ideas in writing.

2) Writing is a really good way to process and internalize a lot of ideas. I want you to try on ideas and wrestle with them until you own them.

3) My classes are always a lot of work. That’s just me. 95 percent of my students appreciate it in the end; 5 percent think it was unnecessary and, in fact, some kind of problem of mine. If you’re concerned about the work, I suggest you talk to those who have taken classes from me before; they can tell you what it’s like better than I can.

I love teaching this class, and I have taught it many times. I look forward to your engaged writing and discussion. Despite all of what I’ve said about what’s bad about teaching writing, all the answers are not in as to what methods are good and effective. That’s tricky. We’ll be working to figure some of this out together. Welcome!

Required Texts:

MacArthur, Charles, Steve Graham, and Jill Fitzgerald. *Handbook of Writing Research*. NY: Guilford Press, 2008. ISBN 978-1-59385-750-9

Miller, Susan. *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*. NY: Norton, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-393-93135-8.

Fu, Danling. *The Trouble is My English*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook, 1995. ISBN 978-0-86709-355-1 / 0-86709-355-2

Readings on Bb

Groups: Each student will be assigned to a group of three or four students. Group members will discuss readings together, review each other’s writing, and participate in activities together. I’ll assign people randomly once the class roster is set.

Requirements:

10% Reading Review:

On the day you are teaching a reading, you will want to plan on having about 15-20 minutes to engage us meaningfully in the questions raised by the text we have read. After 20 minutes you are cut off—absolutely. You are not expected to “cover” the entire reading, to go through every point. You are to make sure the class:

- gets the writer’s central claim or argument
- sees the evidence or theory or other support for the writer’s main argument

- understands the significance and implications of the reading
- understands possible objections or limitations to the author's point of view or findings

Additionally, submit to Blackboard a 1-2 page written document that supports your presentation. Submit Monday night so that classmates can review it.

10% Blackboard Reading Journal:

For each week's reading, write a blog post of a few paragraphs that discusses the readings. This is your opportunity to digest the material, make meaning of it, and possibly share your emerging points of view with others in the class. You will definitely share your blog with your group members who can comment and discuss. The rest of the class *can* read your blog, but they are not expected to do so.

Attendance and Participation: required.

15% Essay: Teaching Writing: Beliefs and Self-Analysis

In the first weeks you will write an essay, in three drafts, just as I have every student of composition do. On this essay we will practice peer review, drafting, brainstorming, revising from feedback.

Question: What, today, is your theory of how to teach writing?

Guidelines: In paragraph two of this syllabus I ask you to consider your operating assumptions. Essentially in this paper I am asking you to do a meta-analysis of your own operating assumptions, to identify and claim your deeply held beliefs about how people learn to write, and to consider how these beliefs influence your intended or actual practice. Be honest here; don't tell me what I want to hear – the point is not to articulate the "right" theory but to do a good brain and life scan to figure out what it is that you believe, in your heart I'll dare say (as corny as that is).

Assessment: This paper will be assessed using a rubric that I will share in class.

25% Essay: Making Sense of Theory:

At mid-semester you will select an issue of concern and identify 4 to 5 authors who have weighed in on the concern to discuss in a theoretical review essay. You will review these teaching theories against one another, and also quite possibly against your own knowledge, observations and experiences. Five pages. Cite 4-5 of the authors you've read for class (no independent research expected or desired).

Expectations for and Assessment for Making Sense of Theory Assignment:

First and foremost I am looking for a claim or organizing question on some aspect of teaching writing. Well-made claims/focused questions are not necessarily made most obviously (i.e., announced as such, in the opening paragraph), but they come through clearly in the entirety of the paper. What is more all of the points made in the paper speak to and come back to that central claim or question; in other words, the paper is focused. These claims or questions are developed and supported through citation and discussion of the theoretical texts and through logical, persuasive discussion of a more general sort.

Secondarily I am looking for sophisticated analyses of the texts and the topic under discussion: is the writer treating the topic with deep understanding of nuance and complexity? More simplistically, has the writer understood the texts under discussion?

Thirdly, I read through these papers rhetorically: for logical organizational structure and style. By style I mean rhetorical effectiveness.

Fourthly, I make sure the paper meets general expectations: appropriate citing practices, on topic, and in keeping with the directions as I assigned them (number of sources, etc.)

35% Term Paper:

Your own topic, approved by me. Draw upon what you've read in class and what you've learned to further study a topic that has come up in the readings. Draw on ten or more authors, including some from class. 10 – 15 pages.

Expectations and Evaluation:

This paper is an investigatory paper: you are investigating a topic to learn what others can tell you about it. Therefore it may not be presented as an argument (though it can be), but rather as an evaluative, reflective report on a topic.

Course Schedule

September 7: Introduction to Class (1st class)

September 14: The Emergence of the Field (2nd class)

Draft of essay, "Teaching Writing" due. 3-4 pages

Kitzhaber, Albert. "The Present State of Freshman Composition." NBCS (*The Norton Book of Composition Studies*), 257-70.

Berlin, James. "An Overview." From *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900 – 1985*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. Bb.

Berlin, James. "Conclusion and Postscript on the Present." From *Rhetoric and Reality*. Bb.

Fox, Tom. "From Freedom to Manners: African American Literacy Instruction in the 19th Century." NBCS, 119-28.

September 21: What is Process Writing? (3rd class)

Faigley, Lester. "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique and a Proposal." 652-666.

Brannon, Lil, et al. "The Five-Paragraph Essay and the Deficit Model of Education." Bb.

Elbow, Peter. "An Approach to Writing" and "Introduction to the Second Edition," from *Writing with Power*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Bb.

Nystrand, Martin. "The Social and Historical Context for Writing Research." HWR. 11-

Second draft of Teaching Writing essay. Submit via Blackboard "Safe Assign." Also bring a hard copy to class. I will be responding to your papers and returning them for you to rewrite. I will also use this assignment to model a few different types of teacher response. (These will be

shared later during the semester.) So your paper, with my comments, may be shared with the whole class. The point is not to scrutinize your essays but rather to get a good look at a couple of different approaches to teacher response.

September 28: Writing Development Research; or, Why Writing is So Hard and Complicated to Teach (4th class)

Tolchinsky, Liliana. "The Emergence of Writing." HWR (*Handbook of Writing Research*). 83-95.
McCutchen, Deborah. "Cognitive Factors in the Development of Children's Writing." HWR. 115-30.

Pajares, Frank and Gio Valiante. "Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Motivation in Writing Development." HWR.

Flower, Linda and John R. Hayes. "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem." NBCS, 467-78.

October 5: Process Writing – Research on Teaching Writing (5th class)

Elbow, Peter. "Loop Writing," from *Writing with Power*. Bb. (not empirical; a theory article that grounds the others)

Emig, Janet. From *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. NBCS. 228-

Sommers, Nancy. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." NBCS. 323-32.

Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, and Valdez. "Investigating the Process Approach to Writing Instruction in Urban Middle Schools." Bb.

Final draft of Teaching Writing essay due.

October 12: Process Writing Evaluation (6th class)

Braddock, Richard. "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose." NBCS 271-282.

Delpit, Lisa. "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse." NBCS 1311-1320.

Jordan, June. "Nobody Means More to Me than Willie Jordan." Bb.

Pritchard, Ruie J. and Ronald L. Honeycutt. "The Process Approach to Writing Instruction: Examining Its Effectiveness." HWR.

Term Paper proposals due. To share with classmates and submit. One page proposal in which a question is posed, defined, and a basic strategy for answering it is formulated.

October 19: Teaching Practices Detailed (7th class)

Nelson, Graff. "Approaching Authentic Peer Review." Bb.

Beach, Robert and Tom Friedrich. "Response to Writing." HWR.

Haswell, Richard. "The Complexities of Responding to Student Writing; Or, Looking for Shortcuts via the Road of Excess." NBCS, 1262-89.

Selections from first-year writing web site, TBA.

October 26: Style and Clarity (8th class)

Lunsford, Andrea and Karen Lunsford, "Mistakes are a Fact of Life." (on Blackboard)

Smith, Michael W, Julie Cheville, and George Hillocks. "I Guess I'd Better Watch My English: Grammars and the Teaching of English Language Arts." HWR.

Editing Handouts from the FYW website.

Schedule conferences for term papers.

First Draft of Making Sense of Theory due.

November 2: Falling through the Cracks (9th class)

Ball, Arentha. "Teaching Writing in Culturally Diverse Classrooms." HWR.

Rose, Mike. "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University." NBCS, 586-604.

Brueggemann, Brenda Jo. "'Writing Insight': Deafness and Autobiography." NBCS, 1243-46.

Hull, Glynda and Mike Rose. "That Wooden Shack Place." Bb.

November 9: Falling through the Cracks, cont. (10th class)

Peterson, Shelley. "Influence of Gender on Writing Development." HWR.

Hareda, Mari. "Contexts for Learning: English Language Learners in a US Middle School." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. 11:1 (2008): 56-74.

Troia, Gary. "Writing Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities." HWR.

Second (and final) Draft of Making Sense of Theory due. Submit Final and other drafts, in packet.

November 16 (11th class): Assessment

Hillocks, George. from The Testing Trap Chapters One and Twelve. Bb.

Huot, Brian and Michael Neal. "Writing Assessment: A Techno-History." HWR.

Selfe, Cynthia L. "Technology and Literacy: A Story About the Perils of Not Paying Attention." NBCS, 1163-85.

Sample assessment practices

November 23 (12th class)

Fu, Danling. *The Trouble is My English*

First draft of term paper due.

November 30 (13th class)

Fu, Danling. *The Trouble is My English*

December 7 (14th class)

Teacher Highlight: Class members who are teachers or tutors bring in one-page "best practice" activities to share with class.

Brief reports on term papers, including one page abstract and works cited list (on Bb).

December 10th (no class) is the final due date for Term Paper