English 780, Teaching Research Writing, is a graduate level seminar in writing for students concentrating in either composition and rhetoric or TESOL for the Master of Arts in English at Wright State University, a public university with approximately 4,000 graduate and 12,000 undergraduate students. The graduate catalogue describes English 780 as "Reading, research, reports, and discussion on topics dealing with the theory and pedagogy of writing."

**ENGLISH 780:**

**TEACHING RESEARCH WRITING**

David Seitz
Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio

David Seitz teaches courses in composition, literacy, ethnography, and rhetoric at Wright State University. His recent publications include an essay in *Under Construction*. He has an essay forthcoming in *Practice in Context: Situating the Work of Writing Teachers* (NCTE) and a book, *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?*, under contract with Hampton Press.

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English 780

Teaching 102: Issues and Responses
MW 2-3:15 121 Millett

David Seitz
Office: 418 Millett 775-3338 or 3136
Email: david.seitz@wright.edu
Office Hours: M, W:11:30-1:00; T: 10:30-11:30, TR: 2-3 and by appointment

Class Text: Coursepack available at Wright State Bookstore.

Issues............
Most college composition teachers describe the second term writing course as their problem class. Often under-theorized, the course becomes the default depository for the "research paper" and generic forms of argumentation. This situation often leads to a course that implicitly emphasizes form over sustained inquiry and can isolate students rather than build a varied research community within the class. In our course, we will explore major approaches toward teaching academic research writing from several critical perspectives in order to theorize responses of teaching practice to these problems.

Responses............
We will examine how to choose a topic area for your research writing class, how to relate it to particular forms of inquiry, and remain open to the diverse interests of your students. We will look at key readings on the teaching approaches below to understand their value and origins. Then we will address views that complicate assumptions about that pedagogy. You will then develop assignments and critical rationales in response to these critiques.

Projects.................
Course Portfolio (80%) consisting of:
1. A rationale for the topic area (or thematic content) and approaches of inquiry you have chosen for your English 102 research-writing course (3pp).
In the process of developing your course, you will be expected to find appropriate readings (or a pool of readings to choose from) in the topic area for the following syllabus units for your course.

For the remaining three sections of our course, you will compose a syllabus unit (or assignment sequence) and critical rationale/narrative for your English 102 curriculum that responds to these issues of teaching research writing.
2. Teaching argumentation
3. Teaching research writing as discourse communities
4. Teaching a mutuality of inquiry between academic and outside communities.
Each project should be approximately 3-5 pp.
Class Work (20%) consisting of:

1. NewsGroup Postings

Criteria for substantive posting and responding to others:
Consider how the reading affirms and/or complicates an aspect of your teaching, learning, or experiences. Try to examine where your assumptions toward the reading come from. Respond as a real reader (and possibly writing teacher) with conflicting identities and motives. Look for what ideas, arguments, and perspectives stand out for you, and reflect on why.

Grade and Frequency of posts:
For an A on this part of the grade, I am expecting 8 substantive postings; for a B 6; for a C, 5.
The syllabus lists six weeks in which you must post a reading response or response to others that refers to our reading. For the other required 2 postings, they must be on two of the three other weeks where I have not required a posting (weeks 3, 6, and 8). For each posting, You must post by the end of the week (even Sunday will do, if you've got something valuable to contribute) to have it count.

Of course, you can use these postings to test out ideas you might work up for a project or to suggest connections from the readings to your project to see what others think.

Rhetorical Issues:
Class newsgroups are a strange rhetorical situation. They should be your forum (I don't assume I should post questions), but you are also being watched, and you are performing rhetorically as graduate students. Still, we should be able to achieve a strong balance between informality, community building, and intellectual thought.

2. Provoking Discussion
Twice during the quarter each of you will be responsible for provoking our sustained discussion and further questioning of the assigned reading. You can do this one of two ways:
A. Public Response Writing (1-2 pp. double-spaced, ending with some open-ended questions to provoke and focus discussion)
Consider this a well-organized reading response with the class as a public forum. You must end by posing to us 2 or 3 well-considered questions.

or

B. Writing/Reading Activity (1-2 pp. lesson plan)
You will lead the group in a short classroom activity (20-30 min.) that explores ideas in the reading by doing as well as discussing. Ideally, the activity should have us experiment and question, not replicate what you may already do in your classrooms.
Your lesson plan must include:
- 1-2 relevant quotes from the reading that drive the purpose of the activity.
- critical objectives for the activity
- an explanation of teaching strategies to achieve these objectives

Note: Let me know 2 days before class the focus for your response or activity, so I can better plan my contribution to the class time.

3. Presentations of project assignments in Workshop format:
Before each due date, you will present your thinking going into a draft to a small group or whole class who will offer questions and suggestions for your final draft. I am making it mandatory you bring a full draft to these classes. This is a graduate-level seminar, and I expect you meet that level of responsibility.

4. Mandatory Conferences:
I will hold periodic writing conferences on drafts for your projects on weeks in schedule and as we see necessary.

Attendance
Missing class more than once will lower your final grade. Should you be absent, contact another class member, so you will be fully prepared for our next class session.

Future Use of Your Work
I like to use real students' papers as good models for class work. I also use students' writing as handouts in academic articles about teaching or in conference presentations. You would be given full credit, and I will make an effort to contact you if I publish your writing in an article or book. If you do not want your writing published or shared with a future class, please notify me in writing. You would not be paid for your writing, but such a publication could be listed on your resume.

Bibliography of Required Readings

**Overarching Goals: Why Topic Inquiry?**


Mack, Nancy, and James Thomas Zebroski, "Transforming Composition: A Question of Privilege" in Hurlbert and Blitz.

**Questions of Argumentation:**


Lamb, Catherine E. "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition" *College Composition and Communication* 42(1): 11-22.


**Academic Discourses and Disciplines:**


Bizzell, Patricia. “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies” in Harkin and Schilb.


Course Schedule
(Definitely subject to change—and most often in your favor):

1. What should be our over-arching goals? 
   What should we consider when developing a topic frame?

WEEK 1
Day 1 Introductions; Syllabus Negotiations, Opening Discussions and Ideas on Research Reading and Writing.
Day 2 McCormick, “On a Topic…” and Herzberg, “Politics”

WEEK 2
➢ newsgroup posting due
Day 1 UIC 161 Course Guidelines
Day 2 Spellmeyer, “Knowledge” and Mack and Zebroski, “Transforming”
2. Why study Argumentation?
What are the social problems with these assumptions?

WEEK 3
- Possible Conferences
Day 1 King’s Birthday. Do something to honor his memory.
Day 2 Draft of Topic Area Rationale due.

WEEK 4
- Newsgroup posting due
Day 1 Toulmin, “Uses of Argument” and Perelman, from Realm of Rhetoric
Day 2 Ohmann, from English in America, Faigley, “Conflicting Rhetoric”

WEEK 5
- Newsgroup posting due
Day 1 Lamb, “Beyond” and Jarratt, “Feminism”
Day 2 Lynch, George and Cooper “Agnostic”

3. How should we define and view Academic Discourse Communities?
Do theories of “difference” ethically challenge these practices?

WEEK 6
- Conferences
Day 1 Draft of Teaching Argumentation unit due.
Day 2 Bizzell, “Cognition”

WEEK 7
- Newsgroup posting due
Day 1 Mahala, “Writing Utopias” and Bazerman, “From Cultural Criticism”
Day 2 Spellmeyer, “Community or Communitas?”

WEEK 8
- Conferences
Day 1 Bizzell, “Marxist Ideas”
Day 2 Draft of Discourse Communities unit due.

4. What are the boundaries between academia and “the real world?”
Do we have a responsibility to promote a mutuality of inquiry

WEEK 9
- Newsgroup posting due
Day 1 Seitz, “Keeping Honest” and Heath and McLaughlin, from Identity and Inner City Youth
Day 2 Moss, “Ethnography”
WEEK 10

➢ Newsgroup posting due
Day 1 Flower, “Partners in Inquiry”
Day 2 Workshop Time on whatever necessary

FINALS WEEK
• Conferences
Draft of Mutuality of Inquiry unit due (on date during finals week to be negotiated).
March 17: Course Portfolio due.
TEACHING RESEARCH WRITING
CRITICAL STATEMENT

All too often conventional graduate seminars in rhetoric and composition separate theoretical debates from the application of teaching practices. We tacitly assume the end product of graduate pedagogy should be a research paper, whether hermeneutic or empirical in nature, rather than a portfolio of teaching materials or a revised curriculum design developed in response to our field's theoretical issues. When we do not question what should be the ends of student work in our composition seminars, we capitulate to the literature research model (perhaps in a show of oppressor envy?) historically rooted in the German research university. This teaching practice in our grad courses helps maintain the underclass of what Jim Sosnoski terms "token professionals," those who constantly struggle for the rarified position of "master critics." Whether trained in composition studies as education researchers or discourse theorists, most teachers will never share the privileged publishing currency of a few academic stars. Building from Sosnoski's critique of literary studies' stratification of work, Peter Vandenberg shows how composition researchers have frequently claimed legitimacy in the research university game by denigrating the writing teacher as ignorant, inconsequential, or the mere consumer of the composition researchers' products. When I was a graduate TA, creating new writing courses meant taking on extra labor on top of the officially sanctioned work of our research scholarship. This attitude in graduate programs has perpetuated the scholarship/teaching binary.

I developed "Teaching 102" to counter this stratification of academic labor. This course integrates the practices of teacher lore—articulated by Stephen North and Patricia Harkin as necessary pragmatic logic and situated knowledge—with the disciplined, critical thought expected in a graduate seminar. As Nancy Mack makes clear, when teachers write critically informed writing assignments and reflect upon the dynamics their assignments create with their students, they are building theories of language, culture, and teaching. With this philosophy in mind, I wanted this course to help develop critically informed teachers rather than "token professionals."
To this end, Teaching 102 focuses on curriculum design as the necessary enactment of critique. In the field of literacy studies and technological communications, Gunther Kress stresses the importance of design in a rapidly changing technological age. He writes, “The task of the critic is to perform analysis on an agenda of someone else’s construction. As a result a considerable degree of inertia is built into this process. Design takes the results of past production as the resource for new shaping, and for remaking” (87). Kress’ designers, like teacher-researchers, critique and adapt past frameworks to the needs of their local situations. In my course, the graduate students design assignments, activities, and curricula for their own English 102 classes based upon their critiques of required reading. This move gives graduate students something I never received—institutional credit for what they often must do on their own without much, or sometimes any, institutional support.

Seminar Objectives: The Project Assignments

In Teaching 102, students work on a sequence of four project assignments, each accompanied by a critical rationale, that will inform the construction of their own syllabi for a theme-based first-year research writing course. At the end of the course, the graduate students present all four projects for evaluation in a course portfolio. The first project assignment, The Topic Rationale, requires each graduate student to develop a topic—such as aging in America, language and power, or issues in the workplace—that will thematically frame their first-year students’ classroom inquiry. The other three project assignments require the graduate students to develop syllabus units for the topic-based first-year course they go on to teach. These units are informed by crucial debates that have emerged in the scholarship of teaching research-based writing over the past 20 years, debates over theories of argumentation, discourse community theory, and research relationships between the academy and external communities.

In response to the argument project assignment, the grad students design a syllabus unit to teach argument that accounts for the problems of teaching argumentation identified in the graduate course readings. The second project assignment requires a syllabus unit that engages students with the concept of discourse communities and related problems. The final project assignment asks the graduate students to design a unit that responds to composition studies’ recent call for a mutuality of inquiry between academia and communities traditionally
outside academic borders. We see the growing concern for this mutuality through the rise of service- or community-based learning, and rhetoric and composition's continuing interest in ethnographic research.

All three teaching-unit projects require the graduate students to articulate pedagogical theories developed in the graduate seminar in three major ways:

- First, the graduate students must forge their teaching philosophies by relating their goals for their students to the theories and practices of scholars identified in seminar readings. They define the subject of each assignment in their English 102 classroom and explain how that definition influences their goals and assignment sequence. For instance, when teaching issues of argumentation to first year students, would they talk of arguments, negotiation, mediation, dialogue or agonistic inquiry in their classrooms?
- Second, they choose the forms or genres their English 102 students will write in for each assignment, such as essays, letters, dialogues, reports. How will the form help shape the kinds of thinking and stance toward each issue of research writing they would want to encourage?
- Third, the graduate students decide where in the tentative sequence of their first-year writing course they might place each syllabus unit they design. This task can prove particularly difficult because their sense of an appropriate sequence may continually evolve as they advance through the progression of scholarship about research writing.

I sequenced the three project assignments as a semi-historical (and thus semi-fictional) progression of scholarship about research writing. According to this narrative of progression, some writing teachers in the 1970's first challenged textbooks versions of arguments as rational egalitarian debates outside any real historical context. In the 80's, teacher-scholars framed academic research as the function of discourse communities in hopes of addressing the social inequities of marginalized students. And currently some composition scholars are questioning the motives of academic research and the impact researchers may have on communities outside the metaphorical ivy walls. I wanted the class to experience these developments in the general order composition sch-
olars took them up; however, once students had created the teaching units, they had to theorize and organize their own sequence of assignments for their English 102 students' portfolios.

Defining the Topical: Building on Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Nancy Mack theorizes that writing teachers must continually re-examine the "dynamic relationship between one's material conditions and one's theory of literacy" if they are to persuade their students that motive matters in the creation of meaning (20). Because I require the graduate students to develop a topic or theme for the English 102 course they will design, the seminar begins by examining rationales for this teaching approach. Drawing from the scholarship on discourse communities, I intended for each graduate student to create a topic-based course that fosters a study of making meaning in a shared intellectual context. But I also borrowed from Friere's concept of teaching with a generative theme when I insist that the graduate students show how their choice of topic relates to their undergraduate students' lives. Thus the topic rationale assignment requires the graduate students to both propose their choice of course theme and map out the general possibilities for their three syllabus units using their thematic frame.

With these aims in mind, my assignment asked the grad students to articulate their motivations for their choice of course topic. I also ask them to suggest how the disciplinary and historical contexts of their topics can structure their composition students' inquiry. Following this, the grad students brainstorm possible issues in this larger topic frame that might motivate English 102 student research. Finally, I required them to discuss their preliminary bibliographical research to assure me they could find academic and popular writings from several disciplines for their three syllabus units. I elaborate the latter three project assignments below.

Theories of Argument: After students complete their topic rationales, we initiate a study of teaching argumentation using excerpts from Toulmin and Perelman to consider the epistemological differences between logical reasoning and audience persuasion in the history of rhetorical theory. Many contemporary research-writing textbooks conflate these two approaches. I intended for us to analyze the purposes of these historical conventions and the assumptions of language and knowledge they relied upon for their persuasive authority. We then looked at teaching argument from Marxist (Ohmann), postmodern (Faigley), and feminist perspectives that value mediation (Lamb) or
conflict (Jarratt) to complicate both threads of the rhetorical tradition, leaving us with new questions and sociopolitical concerns.

In this manner, I want to model a pedagogical approach toward argument as multiple voices and camps situated in specific social contexts rather than as a pro/con debate outside the material concerns of history. I hope the graduate students will view the article by Lynch, Cooper, and George as one pedagogical model that synthesizes these earlier critical positions in ways that they might adapt for their 102 syllabus unit on argumentation. Lynch et al encourage this synthesis when they theorize how to teach argument as a "tool of inquiry" built upon a "multifaceted process that includes moments of conflict and agonistic posturing as well as moments of understanding and communication" (63).

Discourse Community Theory: After the class members design their argumentation syllabus units, we discuss discourse community theory as a pedagogical response to the social problems of featuring argument in first-year research writing courses. In this section of the course, I draw upon Bakhtin’s key metaphors of centrifugal and centripetal forces of language to structure their discourse community project. Put succinctly, authoritative centering forces of language promote coherence of objectives among diverse people, but the de-centering forces work to challenge a tyranny of groupthink and to cultivate new perspectives.

I built this section of the course around Patricia Bizzell’s groundbreaking article, “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty,” and “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies,” her 1991 critique of her previous claims for discourse communities and social equity. This frame of Bizzell vs. Bizzell sets up the stakes involved in both rhetorics of consensus and dissensus. In 1982, Bizzell claimed that teachers would politicize the writing classroom by pointing out discourse conventions because students would examine how knowledge is socially constructed. But in 1991, Bizzell questions whether focusing on the language conventions of discourse communities will promote greater socioeconomic equity in higher education, thus siding with Daniel Mahala’s and Kurt Spellmeyer’s championing of language’s de-centering forces.

For the design of the graduate students’ discourse-community syllabus unit, I required they find a minimum of four readings related to their English 102 course topic that would give their first-year students a
sense of a discourse community constituted by writing—a set of texts interrelated by referencing each other. I suggested that their English 102 readings and class activities could focus on one sub-issue of their course topic that has been debated by groups who cohere as discourse communities. I also offered the grad students three possible approaches to the sequence of their syllabus unit, depending on what readings they could find and their interests in the course topic. They could have their 102 students investigate the discourse of this sub-issue across two or more disciplines, looking at conflicts of meaning, definitions, and knowledge between the disciplines. Here, their class might examine the effects of these forms of knowledge on public policies toward the issue. Or their project might highlight a historical shift, seeing how a discipline’s approach to an issue has changed over time and examining the effects of that change. Or their project could ask their 102 class to compare academic and popular discourses on this sub-issue.

Mutuality of Inquiry: The graduate students’ third project assignment addresses the ethical implications of academics researching communities outside the university. This perspective is something working-class and commuter undergraduate and graduate students—like those at Wright State—can care about. This call for a mutuality of inquiry urges academic researchers to listen more to the material concerns of local communities. Following the goals of Linda Flower’s community-based dialogues in Pittsburgh, this project is meant to foster a “demand for mutuality in analyzing or responding to problems” (97) between academic expertise and community wisdom. The readings in this section offer three models the graduate students might adapt for their 102 syllabus unit. Beverly Moss discusses the use of ethnography in one’s own community. Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey McLaughlin report on a field study of inner-city teen organizations from the teens’ perspectives. And finally, Linda Flower lays out her rationale for community problem-solving dialogues as an alternative to the power imbalance in most service learning courses.

Following from the principles of these three research models, I set up two requirements to help foster a more authentic mutuality of inquiry between “town” and “gown” in the graduate students’ design of their syllabus unit. First, their project should include social interaction outside the classroom or academic setting. This interaction could be in the form of interviews, participant-observation, community dialogue, or a hybrid idea of their own. Second, they should include activities meant to encourage first-year students to critically reflect in writing on the social
interaction between self and other. Keeping this spirit of mutual inquiry, I encourage the class to consider how their English 102 students might write in a "hybrid discourse," as Flower argues for, that could represent various styles of communication and ways of knowing for all parties involved in the research. Reminding them of Moss’ advice, I ask them how the form and style of their students’ writing can demonstrate “a story told jointly by the researcher and members of the community” (Moss 154).

After the graduate students draft and revise the three syllabus units, they revise their initial Topic Rationale as the cover letter to their course portfolio. This cover letter describes their completed sequence of instructional units, explains its logic, discusses the critical goals for their English 102 class, and shows how the sequence supports these goals. To foster collaborative thinking on their projects over the course of the term, I require them to post their responses to the readings to our electronic newsgroup. I also offer students the option of leading the class through teaching activities to provoke thinking on a particular reading rather than presenting a traditional response writing. I imagine the newsgroup as a discursive space somewhere between the commiseration shared in the TA cubicles and the theoretical introspection demanded in the graduate seminar. I hope the newsgroup format will produce a hybrid of practical and theoretical reflection necessary for the goals of my course. Seeking a similar hybrid of theory and practice, I envision the student-created classroom activities as heuristics to interrogate theoretical issues through local knowledge, rather than the default model of textual close reading.

Statement of Locale

I created this course in response to two local situations: the practical orientation of our graduate students and the constraints of the writing program at Wright State. Considering the motives of our graduate students in composition and rhetoric, I designed the course for future teachers, not researchers. In response to the curriculum of our writing program, I offered my graduate seminar as a counter-statement to the program’s English 102 course. This situation inevitably complicated the graduate students’ experiences in my class as they also prepared to teach from the official writing program model of English 102.

First, I considered the goals of our graduate students who can earn a Masters degree in composition and rhetoric at Wright State, but no
Ph.D. Unlike graduate students in some other MA programs in rhetoric and composition, most of our students do not intend to pursue the Ph.D. Most people attracted to our program want experience, disciplinary knowledge, and credentials to teach in community colleges or to supplement their teaching certificates for secondary education. With these goals in mind, our students rarely invest in a professorial identity of research scholar but instead fashion their professional role as teacher. In my introduction to composition studies course, I asked the group to interpret the concerns, values, and possible power relations of the field based on the area clusters in the College Composition and Communication Conference proposal sheet for that year. They quickly showed me with whom they identified when they pointed out how the 4C’s committee had isolated “Teaching in the Two Year College” in its own ghetto in the lower left-hand corner of the page, deprived of any theoretical subcategories that would grant it intellectual heft.

Our masters-level literature or creative writing students come to our program for the love of literary culture. But the students concentrating in composition and rhetoric or TESOL presume that their degree will lead to a job. In this respect our graduate TAs identify strongly with the practical orientations of the undergraduates in their own classrooms. Although Wright State now draws more second-generation middle-class students throughout Ohio, the university has primarily served the four surrounding counties’ rural and suburban white, working-class population. Most of our graduate students also come from these working-class backgrounds, some having family connections with military personnel or workers at the nearby Wright Patterson Air Force Base. Because of these loyalties to place, few of our graduate students plan to move when they finish our two-year program, and almost all of our full-time, non-tenure track writing teachers have come from our own MA program. As I developed the philosophy and structure of this seminar, I had all of our graduate students’ practical orientations firmly in mind.

Second, I focused my course on teachers creating topic inquiry syllabi as a response to several constraints that shape the curricular choices of our writing program. Our two-year MA program, which speeds along by quarters rather than semesters, does not allow TAs time to experiment with and continually revise their teaching of first-year writing classes as Ph.D. programs often do. For this reason, Rich Bullock, our writing program director, requires TAs and adjunct teachers use a common textbook that builds in structure for teaching writing
processes. For over a decade that book was the *St. Martin’s Guide*. In the past year, we have been testing out John Trimbur’s *Call To Write* and suggesting several other choices to the full-time and adjunct teachers.

These time constraints and program decisions effectively discourage our TAs from creating thematic courses. As the writing program director, Rich has rightly worried that new teachers, so bereft of time to develop a sound pedagogy, might lose the aims of critically reflective writing in their facilitation of other theme content. So instead of English 102 classes focused on a particular topic inquiry, our program has developed a sequenced course in which each student individually chooses a research area for sustained inquiry over the course of the quarter. At its best, this model draws upon the student’s intrinsic motivations and concerns, in this aspect recalling Ken McCRorrie’s “I-Search” model, but directed toward questioning larger social problems. And given our program’s constraints, this approach makes sense because it doesn’t rely heavily on individual teachers’ continual reinvention of course content.

Although I understood the rationale for this course philosophy given the constraints of our program, in my role teaching graduate students, I felt the need to offer a counter-statement to the program’s official pedagogy. Some of our full-time teachers had already created courses that offered this counter-statement. Even though the TAs were required to teach from the same textbook, the experienced, full-time teachers had often invented their own thematic research writing courses with Rich’s encouragement. Each of these courses favored different approaches, such as community-based learning, web authoring, creative non-fiction, and critical study of current events. Despite this diversity, this group of teachers tended to focus students’ research on themes of language and social context. I admired how these teachers enacted students’ critical inquiry through the program’s emphasis on writing process pedagogy. Their approach recognized that students could only come to new critical knowledge through a process of developmental stages of inquiry. When our writing program redesigned its English 102 curriculum to its present emphasis on individual topic research, the full-time teachers dropped their thematic pedagogy in order to promote greater coherence as a program, enabling more shared conversation about teaching from the same theoretical structure.

I understood and valued the full-time teachers’ reasons for dropping their thematic courses, but I felt the necessity to expose the graduate students to this alternative pedagogy. Everyone involved in our
composition program encouraged me to expand our graduate TAs' teaching philosophies and repertoire of course models. But pushing this counter-statement was not an easy thing when TAs were learning to teach from the sanctioned program model at the same time. As it turned out, all but two of the students in my "Teaching Research Writing" seminar were first-year TAs enrolled in the TA training course which emphasized individual research rather than my model of shared topic inquiry. This situation led to an unintended paradox. I had intended my course to fully integrate applicable practice with theory. But for the new TAs' sanity, I urged them to view our course as not immediately applicable to their teaching English 102 at Wright State. I strongly suggested they follow the program's approach when they first taught English 102 approximately ten weeks later, even though in my graduate seminar they would create enough teaching materials for their own thematic course. This advice, which the class discussed, compromised my claims for successfully integrating composition theories and teaching practices in the graduate seminar. Throughout the course, I found myself working against, and negotiating with, the program's implicit model that the first year TAs were learning in the other class.

Looking Back

As I had assumed, the seven graduate students appreciated and identified with the course, which emphasized a useful practice for their future teaching. Also, despite periodic grumbling over the technological inconveniences, people learned informally from each other in the newsgroup forum, while taking critical stances that went beyond sharing teaching tips (as excerpts below will suggest). And over the length of the course, each student forged some individually meaningful connections with selected aspects of the theories in our readings. Yet, if the graduate students saw the general value of the theoretical positions, the majority had great difficulty creating their own applicable pedagogy in response to these positions. Indeed, early in the quarter, most moaned that the course was more confusing than their typical graduate classes. With each new project, they would ask how they could persuade their future students that examining these rhetorical and cultural issues through these teaching approaches would lead to meaningful research writing.

I continually had to reassess what would persuade the graduate students that they could create critically informed assignments and activities on the issues for the three syllabus units. As it turned out, the most "teachable moments" for the class were not ones I could have
prepackaged or predicted, but those I had not anticipated. In these instances, when we co-created teaching activities, students were persuaded of the theoretical implications of the teaching practices. At other times, however, I found the graduate students valued my theoretical perspectives only after they had hashed it out for themselves. Often in the newsgroup forum they would weigh how useful these approaches might be to their future teaching. And by that time, only one or two would likely attribute their new understanding to reasons I had argued for in class a week earlier. Here I offer some scenes from the quarter that illustrate these dynamics and how I learned from them.

Since the philosophy of the writing program’s teacher-training course discouraged developing a research writing course around a shared topic or theme, I knew I first needed to persuade my class to value a shared topic-inquiry approach. In this regard, reading and discussing the University of Illinois at Chicago’s course rationale and detailed syllabi descriptions for creating first-year courses proved far more effective than my first group of theoretical and historical readings. The authors of the UIC manual distinguish between content-focused topic courses—in which students write about an issue—and discourse-focused topic courses—in which students analyze academic and popular writing on an issue. This distinction provoked a newsgroup discussion about how first-year students may be more likely to recognize the effects of specific discourses when they share a context of inquiry. Although I was making a similar case in class, it was clearly the peer opinions in the newsgroup that convinced the reluctant ones.

So once the class found purpose in the approach, I was pleased with the range of course topics they pursued. Recognizing Wright State students’ concerns for family, Sandi proposed a course on aging in America. Sharma focused on issues in the workplace, looking to her years of administrative experience and most Wright State students’ vocational motivations. Holly crafted a course on defining deviancy, drawing on her interests in cognition, social behavior, and the national fascination with the aberrant. Amanda wanted to build on her interests in popular culture shared by her students. Both Andrew and Tim firmly believed a focus on language awareness would allow more room for students’ topics within a strong rhetorical and sociocultural frame. Tammy began designing a course on issues of leadership intended for her future job teaching in the Air Force Academy, but she too settled on the topic of language, albeit with readings and assignments geared to the local situation of air force students.
But by midterm, when I read the drafts of their teaching argument syllabus unit, several layers of tension had developed in the class that I feared could derail the rest of the course. Practical-minded students, like Sharma, did not reflect the social implications of our readings in their syllabus units. Theoretically-minded students, like Tim, shortchanged the sequenced details of teaching. The majority had relied on default models for teaching argument, such as writing a rhetorical analysis or a comparison of two or three positions. These models did not correspond to the complexities of teaching argument most of the graduate students had addressed in their critical rationales. Meanwhile, my midterm evaluations confirmed that I had not modeled my own teaching that effectively either. Some students wanted me to involve the class in more activities tied to our course readings, while others aired their confusions over theoretical positions. In response to these problems, I revised my pedagogy using two students’ drafts that offered me other directions I had not anticipated when I had fashioned the argument project assignment.

First-Year Pedagogies in the Graduate Seminar

Andrew and Sandi had drafted course materials that could visually and dramatically engage first-year students in the key issues of argumentation discussed in our seminar readings. Their pedagogical strategies could make concrete the critical theories that most of the class had difficulty integrating into their prior understanding of teaching. As part of Andrew’s syllabus unit on argument for his proposed course on “Language, Power, and Awareness,” he wanted his students to visually map out the “field of debate.” Andrew had borrowed the phrase from John Trimbur’s *The Call To Write*, from which he was currently teaching English 102 as a second year TA. Building upon critiques of teaching argument by Ohmann and Jarratt, Andrew’s assignment asked students to select a visual metaphor from their research or required readings that could demonstrate the power relations among various people and camps. (I later learned that Andrew’s use of visual metaphor originated with my colleague Nancy Mack’s theory map assignment, in which graduate students create a visual metaphor to map out the general theoretical camps in composition studies [see Why Teach Writing?].) Using the middle-class Burkean example, Andrew’s assignment asks, “If all these people and their opinions were to come together at a cocktail party, how might they group themselves, how might they intermingle, how might they situate themselves?” Andrew’s topographical approach encouraged
students to explore, through their visual metaphors, "unfair and unequal societal structures" that affect who gets opportunities to speak and be heard in public forums. For example in recent electoral politics, Ralph Nader might be depicted as buried in a hole compared to Bush and Gore speaking on mountain peaks (or, as some might argue, different peaks of the same mountain). After students had developed their maps, they would write a descriptive narrative that analyzed the positions depicted in their map's topography.

Sandi also wanted her future students in her "Aging in America" course to comprehend argument as multiple perspectives debating an issue within real social contexts. Using the controversy over social security's future as the students' material, she fashioned a different approach in which students needed to research, simulate, and, in a sense, embody the different life situations of people affected by the decisions of social policy. Her project pairs students to research—through textual sources, and possibly interviews—one life situation in response to the social security issue. Sandi wrote paragraph-long life stories that ranged across differences and circumstances of generation, region, social class, and race as the basis for each life situation. In conference over her draft, I had suggested that Sandi could structure the first-year students' open class discussion of the research findings as a mock senate hearing on social security issues. In response, Sandi added into the assignment that each student pair would present their position and also function as senate questioners for their fellow students. After a classroom analysis of the hearing, students would write reflective responses to the arguments and rhetorical strategies presented. The sequence divided into five parts: "read, research, represent (role-play), reflect, and respond." Sandi asserted that the structure of the project, encompassing both oral and written competencies, would provide a "great opportunity to look at and examine what voices were 'heard,' why this might have proved to be, and whether these results would translate to society at large" (6).

Andrew's and Sandi's projects offered clearer, more lively, models for analyzing and teaching the issues of argumentation than I had demonstrated so far in our class. So with their permission, I used the structure of their project activities to help our class reconsider our readings on argument and to imagine creative models for revising their projects. Handing out copies of Andrew's and Sandi's drafts, I told one group to visually map out the field of debate for 4-5 of our readings on teaching argument. I told the other group to develop 4-5 life situations for these issues of teaching arguments, considering teachers in different
kinds of institutions, students, administrators, parents, and people in the work world. The visual map group drew a series of stick figures on the black board, irreverently skewering the values and assumptions of our authors. None of them was spared. Toulmin was a robotic Frankenstein monster, Perelman a sleight of hand magician entertaining an audience while keeping something up his sleeve. Ohmann chiseled away at a massive block of the status quo with his hammer and sickle. Lamb and Jarratt clasped each other in barefooted sisterhood wearing t-shirts that said, “Keep your laws off my body”; Jarratt, however, in an appreciation of conflict over mediation, wielded a knife ready to stab her sister in the back. When I asked the group how the images related to each other, they were stymied. But when I reminded them how Ohmann could be seen as one granddaddy of radical critique in composition, they quickly mapped the caricatures onto a family tree and explored family metaphors based on their interpretations: who sired whom? Who was the matriarch, the kindly uncle, the warring sibling? As we savored and debated the interpretations, I better appreciated that literary models of close reading are not the only route to internally persuasive critique and understanding.

While the other group assigned to create life situations muttered about not getting an overtly playful activity, they carefully considered how institutional setting and job constraints might influence different teachers’ approaches to argument. They created a continuum of higher education, encompassing community colleges, elite schools, and applied business training. With this continuum, they discussed constraints of time, money, student motivations, and accountability to outside constituencies that would affect how instrumental or explicitly critical an approach each teacher might take. The group’s continuum prompted a discussion of who has the economic or cultural capital that they can afford to teach a more complex view of public debates.

In this class discussion, I referred to our borrowings of Andrew’s and Sandi’s activities as carrying on the informal tradition of teaching as community practice, what TAs might share in the hallway, but rarely in the graduate seminar. And by enacting versions of their assignment, we were also helping Sandi and Andrew critique their designs in action. To my delight, Holly, whose course topic focused on discourses of deviancy, took this philosophy seriously and revised her argument syllabus unit as a reworking of Sandi’s life situations model appropriate to her course theme. In Holly’s version, groups took on life situations from readings by people perceived as deviant in dominant American culture, such as single moms, people who accept being fat, teens sporting
Goth fashion. But Holly focused on a written rather than oral public forum. Taking on one of these characters' life situations, individual members of the groups would each write a commentary. The group members would then compile their commentaries for the same character into a group newspaper. Each group would then write responses from the perspectives of their life identities to another groups' newspaper in the form of letters to the editor. Holly's direct involvement in my version of Sandi's activity obviously had more persuasive impact than my individual efforts in writing and conferences.

*Struggling with/against Discourse Community Theory*

My students had led me to a stronger understanding of activity in the graduate classroom, or any writing classroom for that matter. Developing the course, I had unconsciously conceived of class activity as more conventional group acts of analytical reading, writing, and oral discussion tied to texts—approaches favoring a print-based, essayist, academic literacy. Yet when we found ways to approach the issues of the class through metaphors, visual representations, scenarios (a strategy students took up several times near quarter's end) or other visibly concrete actions, most of the class better comprehended the issues. These more concrete approaches helped them see how they might formulate responses through their own teaching practices. So as we moved into our section on discourse communities, I tried to capitalize on this approach and energy—sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

For instance, I gave them Art Spiegelman's comic strip homage to Charles Shultz's "Peanuts" and asked them how it might visually show the workings of a discourse community. Instead of writing an essay that lends itself more to monologic discourse, Spiegelman draws and writes a three-page comic strip. The strip visually plays with official and unofficial comic strip styles, or languages, rooted in particular histories represented here by characters from earlier and later American cartoons. In addition to this visual approach, I asked groups to negotiate their own definition of "discourse community" based on our readings, identify a discourse community common to the group, and choose a metaphor that would characterize this community. They then had to discuss what that metaphor might reveal about the relations between language and power within that community.

These activities helped encourage the classroom environment and learning the students called for in their midterm evaluations. Yet I still ran into a stone wall from Amanda when I solicited questions in class
about the discourse community project assignment sheet I had just handed out. Speaking from sincere frustration, Amanda believed her English 102 students could not handle the level of rhetorical complexity that still perplexed her as well. The class fell silent, some possibly frustrated with Amanda’s immediate resignation, but others clearly worried that she may be right—could they pull it off in their classes? I was frustrated that my class tended to view a pedagogical concept already inscribed in at least a dozen composition textbooks as too philosophical and ambitious for first-year college writing. So listening to everyone’s concerns, I scribbled notes on the back of my assignment sheet in hope that once away from the class I could be more reflective about our fears.

Amanda appointed herself the class critic, drawing out into the open confusions and resentments more quietly shared by others. Identifying herself in several of our newsgroup postings as “the bitter dumb blonde,” she rightly pushed at the tension of practice and theory behind my course when she bemoaned the impracticality of Bizzell’s and Spellmeyer’s writing. As everyone struggled with designing their discourse community syllabus units, Amanda asked, “How can we really align ourselves with, or criticize any of these authors when we have little to no idea about how these people incorporate their theories into their classes? I, like Andrew, need help on how to apply these high falutin’ ideas to my little ol’ English class. Why can’t these philosophers step off their pedestals (or soapboxes) to help me do just that?” Classmates used this posting as a barometer for their level of frustration with the course. Tammy wrote a few weeks later, “I don’t quite have Amanda-level frustration yet, but after sampling all these sometimes contradictory theories and stabbing blindly at creating practices based on these theories, I am starting to feel a little crazy.”

Underlying the graduate students’ frustrations with my project assignment was a questioning of the writing teacher’s motives, particularly in comparison to their own experiences as students. In class and in the newsgroup postings, Tim continually wrestled our discussions on various readings back to the composition teacher’s responsibility to teach the “language of power” as the cultural capital of the middle-class. Relishing the role of devil’s advocate, Tim contended that valorization of multiple literacies and discourses wrongfully ignored this reality of our students’ lives. We debated from theory and family experiences how much of this language of power is in the formal structure and grammar of discourse or in processes of thinking. Amanda
argued that her father achieved financial success when he learned to elevate his diction above the dialect of his white working-class background. Tammy told of her grandmother’s similar faith in “proper speaking” as the miracle of upward mobility for their Southern African-American family. But Andrew wondered if the repeated phrase “money talks” best reflected the language of power for many Wright State students. He suggested they didn’t yearn for upper-middle class language but simply the degree as certificate to the better job (or perhaps they implicitly recognized that language as cultural capital cannot make up for many social inequalities). Eventually the class postings examined an inevitable and necessary tension between teaching some monolithic language of power and recognizing the reality of multiple discourses our students would undoubtedly encounter in their futures. Perhaps the great difficulties of learning how to teach research writing within this contradictory tension helped fuel their frustrations with my curricular aims of the discourse community project.

As the deadline for first drafts of their syllabus units loomed large, Sandi discovered another entryway to first-year students’ investigations of discourse communities. In a newsgroup response to Tammy’s call for students’ valuing non-academic learning, Sandi suggested her students could write a family legend or folk tale as a form of research. They would “evaluate the lessons learned from this family story (even if they decide the lesson was only that Uncle Harold couldn’t hold his liquor).” Then they would compare this evaluation with an evaluation of an academic learning experience to form a bridge between the two forms of learning.

In an on-line response, Andrew immediately encouraged Sandi’s approach and suggested the students could explicitly analyze families as discourse communities. He theorized that the activity would make the students more conscious of the writing and language of the discourse communities surrounding them while bringing humor and parody into the class. The students could investigate “or just ponder their own lives and discourse as these local aspects fit into the larger world, society, or whatever the students might call it.” Two days later he began adapting Sandi’s strategy for his own discourse community syllabus unit and English 102 course on language awareness.

At first I was a little uncomfortable with viewing actual families as a metaphor for academic discourse communities. As I read this electronic exchange, I recalled how Joseph Harris had fervently rejected Stephen Fishman’s and Lucille’s McCarthy’s metaphor of family to ethnographically describe Fishman’s classroom as a discourse
community. Harris pointed to the historical oppressions within dominant ideologies of family life and his mistrust of hidden patriarchal assumptions that might seep into our pedagogy. In effect, if we used this metaphor of family as our ideal community, we might inadvertently recreate some of the power struggles that oppress individuals in many real families.

But when Andrew posted a response to Bizzell’s 1991 critique of discourse community pedagogy, he showed how I planted the seed of this metaphor earlier in our class. He referred to Bizzell, who urges composition teacher-scholars to “acknowledge the intellectual fathers and mothers against whom we collectively define ourselves” yet cautions us to “be prepared to discover that we belong to feuding families” interested in exploring different sets of social contradictions (66). Andrew claimed Bizzell indirectly demonstrated “what Dr. Seitz is suggesting about family and discourse communities.” Only then did I recall my in-class suggestion to read our scholars on argumentation as family alliances and conflicts.

Through their ideas for teaching practice, Sandi and Andrew now made me rethink the theoretical position of other composition scholars such as Harris. Precisely because family dynamics are often so fraught with power struggles, the metaphor offered a concrete model for understanding the centering and de-centering forces within a discourse community. In our classroom discussion that followed these exchanges, I was able to enrich Sandi’s and Andrew’s pedagogy of the family metaphor with a larger disciplinary context. In this way, I could show how we were reciprocally remaking the discipline at the level of our own practices. Understanding the discourse community project’s aims through this metaphor helped enable the rest of the class to create their own direction appropriate for their chosen course topic.

Revising the Design of Teaching 102

At our last class, we talked about how to revise the course. We all agreed that the expanded range of classroom activities we co-created brought these issues of teaching to life, and next time I would explain the value of these activities more fully in the texts of the project assignments. Similarly, we all felt future classes should receive model student papers of the projects to help ease the confusion of writing in an unfamiliar, because often neglected, genre. As I incorporate some of these model projects into the class, I would also cut theoretical readings from several sections of the syllabus. After several readings on a
particular teaching issue of research writing, most of the class complained they could not find substantial differences between some of the authors' positions. I had intended these readings on the same issue as multiple perspectives, but the students rightly challenged whether the more subtle differences ultimately mattered for their classroom teaching.

Several years ago Doug Hesse likened his teaching assistants' dismissal of complicated texts to the response of most first-year students to complex positions in their writing classes. Hesse urged graduate teachers to recognize that new graduate students, like new undergraduates, "must develop habits of learning" that don't "neatly fit our worldviews" (231). I agree, and would add that we can learn more about our own teaching if we allow room for graduate students' resistance to these texts—like that voiced by Amanda's frustrations in my class. Their resistance derives from their experiences on the borders of student and teacher identities. We can learn from that resistance how to be more responsive teachers, available to the moment of mutual learning and teaching before us.¹

Dayton, Ohio

Notes

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Works Cited


TEACHING RESEARCH WRITING 121


