Course Design

English 341: Advanced Composition for Teachers

William Duffy

Course Description

English 341: Advanced Composition for Teachers is a three-credit undergraduate course for pre-service educators at Francis Marion University, a mid-size public university located in northeast South Carolina. According to the university catalog, students enrolled in English 341 “explore connections among writing, teaching, and learning as they examine the implications that their experiences as writers have for their work as teachers” (95). The English department at FMU offers three concentrations: a Liberal Arts (literature) track, a Professional Writing track, and a Secondary Teacher Certification option. The students who enroll in English 341, however, are almost exclusively early-childhood education, elementary education, and middle level education majors, all of who must complete the course as a degree requirement.

Institutional Context

Founded in 1970, Francis Marion University (named after the Revolutionary War hero, General Francis Marion) is located in Florence, South Carolina, and is one of the state’s four-year, state-supported universities. While FMU does have small, localized graduate programs in the Schools of Business and Education, and in the departments of nursing and psychology, the majority of its 4,000 students are undergraduates, and many of these are first-generation college students. The English department is home to FMU’s Composition Program, which includes a three-course sequence all FMU students are required to complete: English 111 (Introduction to Composition), English 112 (Argumentative Writing), and English 200 (Writing in the Disciplines), although students can place out of English 111 and English 112 with a score of 500+ on the SAT, transfer credit, or by composing an essay that the department chair and composition coordinator review. Before it was renamed “Advanced Composition for Teachers,” English 341 was identified in the course catalog as English 220: Advanced Composition. Students who enrolled in English 220 did earn a writing credit, but otherwise it was something of an ambiguous course insofar as the class was neither required for English majors nor a unique course with a content-specific moniker. As one of my colleagues in the English department remarked, English 220 always had an identity problem largely because it was a course without a defined audience.
Indeed, the course description for English 220 communicates its existence as a catchall writing course with no specified purpose:

**ENG 220 Advanced Composition (3)**

(Prerequisite: A grade of C or higher in English 200) Extensive work in practical writing, including personal, informative, and analytical composition. The frequent assignments involve training in evaluation of writing and in both primary and secondary research techniques. (*Catalog* 2003–04)

Such a description obviously fails to define what exactly “advanced composition” means, especially when English 220 is compared to the English department’s existing composition courses. Its emphasis on “both primary and secondary research techniques,” for example, sounds much like the purpose of English 200 (Writing in the Disciplines). Moreover, what is “practical writing”? A euphemism for workplace or professional writing? The English department already offers “advanced” writing courses in creative nonfiction, professional writing, and technical writing, in addition to a “Special Topics in Writing” course that allows instructors to theme an advanced writing course around a specific content area. In short, English 220 existed as an ambiguous course with no distinguishable purpose when considered alongside other offerings in the English department’s writing curriculum.

The one exception to its apparent lack of purpose is that the course was required for education majors specializing in early-childhood, elementary, and middle-level teaching. The School of Education believed its majors needed at least one writing-intensive course beyond English 200 (Writing in the Disciplines), and thus English 220 was designated a required course for these students. The problem is that English 220 was not originally conceptualized as a writing course for pre-service educators, which one can obviously discern from its course description above. Moreover, because there was always a small contingent of non-education majors enrolled in the course (usually professional writing majors who needed another writing credit), the course’s instructors found themselves in a bind. Do they shape English 220 to the specific needs of pre-service teachers who will be writing and teaching writing as professional educators? If so, doesn’t that “leave behind” (forgive the allusion) those students in the course who are not pre-service teachers? On the flip side, if English 220 is a course primarily populated by education majors, why not tailor the course to them? It was this dilemma that motivated the English department to rethink English 220 and its curricular identity.

Under the direction of several professors in the department, including Kenneth Autrey, Matthew Nelson, and Meredith Love, English 220: Advanced...
Composition was eventually dropped from the books in the 2010–11 academic year and in its place emerged English 341: Advanced Composition for Teachers. In collaboration with the School of Education, the English department conceptualized English 341 as an advanced writing course designed exclusively for pre-service educators. What distinguishes the course from other writing courses the department offers, aside from its well-defined audience, is its dual purpose. Not only is it an “advanced composition” course that focuses on what it means to write like a teacher, for lack of a better phrase, but it also serves as a pedagogy course that provides students with instruction in the teaching of writing itself. As mentioned above, English 341 is a required course for early childhood, elementary, and middle-level education majors; in fact, these are the only students who now enroll in the course. The English department does offer a composition pedagogy course, English 340 (Theories of Writing), but this course is chiefly designed for majors in the Secondary Teacher Certification track, and thus it covers material that does not directly apply to the writing that English 341’s target audiences will teach in their future positions. In fact, English 341 provides education majors not enrolled in a secondary education program with a writing-intensive course centered on the notion that ultimately all teachers, in one way or another, are teachers of writing.

Now in its third year of existence, English 341 is one of the English department’s regularly offered advanced writing courses. But because the course is still relatively new, its identity (at least in terms of content) is still fairly undefined. That is, while English 341 is more clearly conceptualized than English 220, the course is nevertheless a novel addition to the department’s curriculum and as such none of the three professors who have taught the course have left a distinct set of fingerprints that might give the course a stable identity from one semester to the next. In fact, when Professor Autrey retired in 2011, I joined the English department as a rhetoric and composition specialist who could ostensibly give English 341 a shape and content appropriate for its intended purpose, which, according to the 2011–2012 catalog, is to provide students with opportunities for “careful reading and practice composing in various modes relevant for early-childhood, elementary, and middle-level teachers” (95).

Theoretical Rationale

Scholars in the field of composition studies have a long history of studying the theory/practice binary in the work of teaching writing. In a 1977 *CCC* article, for example, Richard Gebhardt asserts the need for “Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers,” as the piece’s title reads. Gebhardt contends, in short, “that students preparing to teach writing in public school or college should understand important conceptual underpinnings of composition and the teaching of writing and should test them out
in practice” (134). Gebhardt’s claim is an early argument for the value of praxis, what teachers of writing understand to be the critical space where one’s training in theories of composition and its various pedagogies gets evaluated alongside reflection of teaching in action. Next to Gebhardt’s piece in that same issue of CCC appears Janet Emig’s “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” in which she uses the educational psychology of Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner, and others to suggest a theoretical framework for recognizing the heuristic value of writing as a “uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning” (125). Emig argues, in other words, that writing is not just a medium for spelling out what one has already learned; it is a vehicle for learning itself, an activity that actually fosters the production of knowledge. So while Gebhardt argues about the ideal structure of a composition pedagogy course, Emig focuses on the pedagogical value of composition itself as a tool for enhancing learning processes. For rhetoric and compositionists today, these classic arguments about the pedagogical value of writing and teacher training function as disciplinary commonplaces, ones that hardly need defending.

I reference these pieces because I stumbled upon them when preparing my syllabus for English 341. Specifically, I was researching how compositionists negotiate the presentation of pedagogical theory alongside occasions for practice when the course under consideration is not a traditional practicum. As Sidney Dobrin reminds us, pedagogy courses in our discipline are locations where “theory/practice debates are played out with very material ramifications” (3). He notes in particular how students in these courses learn “skills/trades/pedagogies” that will ostensibly be passed to students of their own (28). It would seem, then, the notion of praxis is an invaluable concept to draw upon in order to mediate composition’s theory/practice dichotomy. When Gebhardt and Emig’s articles are read side-by-side, these seemingly dated pieces present a timely challenge to instructors of English 341 and similar courses, requiring us to reconsider the meaning of praxis, especially the extent to which the “practice” implicit in the concept of praxis needs a definite shape or outline prior to critical reflection. In other words, do teachers of writing need identifiable “practices” in order to participate in the kinds of critical reflection that sharpens self-awareness and encourages thoughtful teaching?

In the case of English 341, for example, what exactly does it mean to practice “composing in various modes relevant for early-childhood, elementary, and middle-level teachers”? While the course description for English 341 spells out its purpose in terms noticeably more concrete than that of English 220, what was a problem of definition in conceptualizing the purpose of the latter course seemingly gives way to a problem of scope in conceptualizing the content of the former. Indeed, how does one zero in on appropriate pedagogical instruction relevant to those who, on one end of the spectrum, will be teaching 4- and
5-year-olds, and, on the other end, 12- and 13-year-olds? Surely the training that early-childhood educators need to teach writing is different from what elementary teachers need, which, in turn, should be different from the training that middle school teachers receive.

These differences represent the hurdles I faced when I joined the department two years ago and began teaching English 341. Not only was I unsure “how” to teach composition pedagogy to such a wide range of students, but I also questioned whether it was possible to actually deliver such a course in the first place. In short, English 341 seemed to address too wide a range of future teachers for me—or anyone else, I assumed—to design instruction in composition pedagogy that could adequately speak to each group. To confront these challenges I stepped back to reevaluate how students would be best served in the course, especially given these questions of scope and content. Consequently, I ended up revising the student outcomes for the course using language that highlights writing as a form of inquiry, a variation of Emig’s “writing to learn” model. For example, I emphasized that students would “develop strategies for using writing as a method for reflection and discovery in the classroom,” an aim that, while open-ended, nudges students to consider the inventive potential of writing as a method for asking questions about what they are learning. Revising the course outcomes in this way allowed me to rethink what kinds of pedagogical theory would be most helpful for students while also taking into consideration what types of writing assignments could successfully bridge the theory-practice split of a composition pedagogy course.

The result is a course that directs pre-service teachers to examine themselves as writers and teachers of writing by engaging these identities through inquiry that targets what Paulo Freire calls “untested feasibility.” Education requires confrontation with “limit-situations,” occasions where our experience is inadequate to overcome particular challenges we perceive within a given task. If we believe there is nothing beyond these limit-situations—that it is impossible to overcome them—fatalism is sure to result. But according to Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, we transform limit-situations by engaging the untested feasibility of our “potential consciousness,” which is, in short, Freire’s method for fostering conscientização, or critical consciousness (113, 119). Learning to write certainly represents a limit-situation for students, especially when they conceive of writing as a performance they can either pass or fail. So to teach writing as a form of inquiry, as a place where students get to experiment with composition and take risks, teachers must model what this kind of writing entails. To borrow from Freire, teachers of writing must acknowledge the existence of limit-situations and model how to transform them. In my case, this meant I had to acknowledge my own limit-situations (I’ve never taught
4-year-olds to write, for example) while creating space and opportunity for students to teach me as I attempt to teach them.

As I articulated this rationale to myself, I noticed the pragmatic dimension of Freire’s critical pedagogy, especially in his notion of untested feasibility. The relationship between pragmatism and critical pedagogy is evident for Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly as well. The original American pragmatists, including but not limited to Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, all believed the most useful philosophies were those that could mediate competing claims while allowing individuals to arrive at contingent truths that facilitate action. This, too, is the goal of Freire’s pedagogy. Here is where the two philosophies meet:

Critical literacy for Freire involves movement between participant/reflector, reflector/participant; for the pragmatists, too, movement between doing/reflecting/doing constitutes the path of learning. Central to both the pragmatic agenda and Freire’s praxis is the necessary connection between action and reflection; this connection leads both Freire and the pragmatists to a sense of hopefulness, a belief at least in contingent possibility. For both philosophies, belief means a willingness to act and the assurance that reflection on action will lead to better, more hopeful acts. (Ronald and Roskelly 614)

It is not enough for Freire and the pragmatists to simply point to reflection and argue that it alone makes education viable. Nor is it enough to prescribe specific practices that supposedly constitute the practical application of a particular pedagogy. Instead, the movement between participant/reflector and doing/reflecting/doing that Ronald and Roskelly underscore is actualized when learners discover their own outlets for experimentation. As Freire defines the idea of praxis, it is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (51; emphasis added). New teachers, especially those who will be teaching early, elementary, and middle-level students in public schools, will struggle to balance the demands of curricular oversight and nationalized systems of assessment alongside the hope and change associated with education that get circulated in our cultural narratives about schooling, ideals that prompt many teachers to enter the profession in the first place. By promoting a notion of praxis that is purpose-oriented rather than practice-oriented, we encourage teachers to identify the why of their teaching alongside the what and how. Moreover, purpose-oriented praxis supports the basic arguments about writing as a mode of learning first articulated by Emig, and later echoed by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon when they assert “knowing is an activ-
ity, not a condition or state”; and knowledge itself “implies the making of connections, not an inert body of information” (467).

Pairing this foundational notion that we “write to learn” with the critical-pragmatic method outlined by Ronald and Roskelly, I shaped English 341 as a course in which students use writing as a tool for assessing the consequences of their developing identities as teachers, an approach that allowed me to direct attention to how writing can be adapted to particular classroom types. My approach to English 341 was to present writing as a pedagogical resource available to practically any teacher; as well, I emphasized how to develop critical-pragmatic attitudes toward writing that encourage the development of responsible pedagogies rooted in the “writing to learn” ethic. In the course syllabus I communicated these aims by presenting the goals of the course in two categories, ones that summarized how we would think about ourselves as teachers and writers respectively. Initially, then, I wanted students to approach this course with two distinct (and if not for a time, competing) focuses for the work we would undertake in the class. The first of these points of focus directs attention to the idea of literacy and how we understand and communicate its personal, academic, and public value. Here questions get asked about the work of writing in educational contexts and how to encourage students across grade levels to experiment with its challenges. The second point of focus engages the idea of writing itself and what it looks like to expand our knowledge of how writing works. By interrogating their own writing habits, for example, students are encouraged to recognize how composition is both a productive and an interpretative art that influences and informs how we think about, observe, and act in the world.

By initially separating these two areas of inquiry, I designed the course to challenge students to interrogate their own understanding of teaching alongside the value of writing. In this way I intended students to connect their experiences with writing in the course to the concepts and theories about writing itself conveyed in course readings. The class met on Tuesdays/Thursdays, which I felt created a natural organization for how to balance the teaching-writing dichotomy that I imagined would function as a limit-situation for students, at least initially. Indeed, the course syllabus reflected this split by using Tuesdays for discussion of course readings and Thursdays for “practice” centered on students’ own writing. In theory, then, students would get to spend half of the week focused on questions about what it means to teach writing while spending the other half working through their development as teachers who write.

The books I chose for the course represent the kind of varied discussions of writing I concluded would be most useful for pre-service teachers who will most likely never again take a college-level composition pedagogy course. The first of these texts, Understanding Writing: Ways of Observing, Learning,
and Teaching, edited by Nancie Atwell and Thomas Newkirk, is a collection of essays written by practicing teachers in early-childhood and elementary contexts. The contributors detail particular assignments and classroom-based pedagogies that incorporate writing. While the text itself is dated (the latest edition was published in 1987), the activities and experiences chronicled in the essays are easily adaptable to today’s classrooms. The second book I selected, Peter Elbow’s collection of essays Everyone Can Write, is the most traditional work of composition theory and pedagogy included on the syllabus. As most Composition Studies readers are aware, Elbow’s appeal is located in his practical insistence to model theory as he proposes it. For example, in one of his essays, “Freewriting and the Problem of Wheat and Tares,” nearly half of the essay is Elbow’s own unedited freewriting that he completed to get started on that particular composition. In this way, Elbow offers novice compositionists a personal and low-stakes invitation to experiment with writing in practice. The third book I assigned is Anne Lamott’s Bird By Bird, a collection of short essays about the craft of writing by a popular and experienced writer of fiction and nonfiction. Like Elbow, Lamott delivers her advice to writers via personal experience, but Lamott’s often irreverent tone helps readers disassociate the kinds of standardized writing many of us experience in school from the kinds of writing professionals do for a living, or just for fun.

These texts, coupled with the assignments I designed for the course (discussed below), come together to present novice teachers of writing with an introduction to composition pedagogy that encourages them to cultivate a critical-pragmatic attitude toward the value of writing as both a pedagogical tool and an outlet for reflection and revision.

**Critical Reflection**

Without inflating the students’ positive evaluations of the course, I believe this approach to English 341 was quite successful. Not only did the course productively engage the advanced composition/composition pedagogy split that I struggled to conceptualize the first couple of times I taught the course, but the students themselves also acknowledged this engagement in their course evaluations and in the retrospective essays I required them to compose at the end of the semester. From my perspective, most of this success was a result of the writing students completed in the course, all of which required them to balance their experienced identity as students with their emerging identity as teachers.

The first essay assignment, which is more or less a literacy narrative, asked students to connect specific moments from their experiences with school to an understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Titled the “Becoming a Teacher” essay, the assignment made explicit reference to Anne Lamott’s con-
versational style of writing in *Bird By Bird*, a book that is constructed around specific memories from the author’s life as they relate to the craft of writing. In this way, I asked students to use Lamott’s style as a model for imitation to frame their own experiences around whatever ideas about teaching they want to tease out in the essay. Most students wrote about the experience of “playing school” as a child, or they recalled specific teachers from their pasts who influenced their decision to enter the profession. Some students wrote about growing up in a family of teachers, while others discussed their experience being the first person in the family to attend college. In short, this assignment allowed students to identify specific beliefs they hold about the value of teaching while locating where these beliefs originated in their experience.

With the second essay, I asked students to identify and write about a particular experience with failure. Like with the first essay, students were given free reign to write about any experience that was relevant, but herein is where the assignment presented its primary challenge: students could pick a failure from any sphere of their experience. In other words, students did not have to write about a school-based failure, which meant students were also tasked with deciding what counts as “a failure” in the first place. To make this writing even more difficult, the only rule I imposed is that whatever failure students wrote about, they were not allowed to romanticize the failure in their writing by resolving it with a “here’s what I learned” or “everything happens for a reason” conclusion. As I told my students, in these essays let the failure be a failure; get it down on the page, shape the narrative as you need to, but don’t let the failure turn into anything else. At the time, we were discussing student experiences with composition and the fears and anxieties about writing that sometimes develop early in one’s schooling. Peter Elbow’s own “failure” essay, “Illiteracy at Harvard and Oxford: Reflections on My Inability to Write,” served as a representative example that failure is just as much an idea as it is an occasional result of sometimes arbitrary assessment. Lamott’s praise of “shitty first drafts” also conveys a similar attitude about writing: that it is tough to do and doesn’t always work out. As Lamott notes, “For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written is to write really, really shitty first drafts” (22). Writing “shitty first drafts,” of course, does not necessarily alleviate the tension inherent in chronicling a personal failure while framing it as such, but this assignment deliberately draws on that tension to mediate the different notions of performance and agency that we bring to the classroom, both as students and teachers. Indeed, as Allison Carr notes in her recent *Composition Forum* article on the subject, “Although we experience and talk about failure in all realms of life, it is especially prominent in our classrooms, where failure
is formalized with rubrics and learning outcomes and complicated metrics of assessment” (Carr).

The failure essay was by far the hardest writing students undertook in the course, at least according to them. What stymied most students was the rule I imposed about not resolving whatever failure they chronicle in the essay, which, as my students pointed out, goes against how they are conditioned to think about failure in the first place. For them a failure is a temporary, negative result, one that we learn from in order to produce positive results. Several students wrestled with the concept of failure itself because, according to them, it fell outside the scope of a productive concept. Regardless, this assignment allowed students to interrogate an intimidating concept that often gets used to assess student performance. At the same time they were able to reflect on failure’s relative meaning in practice. Because a handful of students wrote about their own failures with writing, moreover, the opportunity to confront these negative associations while doing the very thing at which these students “failed” made for several very interesting and provocative class discussions.

The second half of the semester we turned more explicitly to the work of teaching writing as students tackled the research project I assigned, one I simply dubbed the Praxis Report. My primary goal with the assignment was to show students how to interact with scholarship in a way that might encourage them to use research as a resource in their teaching. To this end, the Praxis Report required students to identify and research a peer-reviewed journal relevant for their area of teaching. After studying back issues of whatever journal they selected, students then had to select several articles from the journal that engaged a topic of interest to them, at least one of which needed to focus on writing in some respect. The report itself (what they submitted to me) consisted of an overview of the selected journal that explains its value for teachers like themselves, three critical summaries that review the articles they selected from the journal, and finally a “praxis” element in which students used what they learned in the articles to craft an assignment sequence, classroom activity, or other practical application to use in their teaching. While students were welcome to freely choose the journal they used for the Praxis Report, I encouraged them to locate journals that were written for practicing teachers, so early-childhood majors might examine Young Children, for example, while elementary education majors might select Language Arts.

As I discussed in the previous section, one of my initial challenges with the course was figuring out how to teach the teaching of writing to such a wide range of future educators. With the Praxis Report, however, students tackled this issue for themselves by drawing on whatever journal articles they located to articulate what “teaching writing” might look like in the classrooms they are preparing to enter. Reflecting on that assignment now, I can say that altogether
students identified pieces of scholarship that interested them and constructed creative applications around this research. In fact, what surprised me the most was how engaged students were with research once they discovered that there are scholarly journals designed for practicing teachers. As a result, I witnessed firsthand future writing teachers wrestle with the untested feasibility of inventing practical applications for pedagogical theory. One student with an interest in physical education, for example, transformed scholarship about the pedagogical value of tracking physical activity into an assignment that requires students to maintain a journal in which they write about how their lifestyle habits reflect whatever health-related concepts they are studying in class. Another student, this one a future third grade teacher, designed a photovoice activity wherein students take portraits of things they enjoy and use the photos to write an autobiography that revolves around their personal interests.

The final writing assignment in English 341 focused on preparing a professional portfolio that contains a resume, job application cover letter, and a teaching philosophy. Locating this assignment at the end of the semester seemed to be a natural fit given the nature of the course; indeed, students welcomed this combination of practical and creative writing as a capstone assignment. Because they had dabbled with several different forms of writing in the class, from nonfiction essay writing to critical summaries of research, students recognized how the professional documents they create to define themselves as teachers should reflect both their personality and their professional experience.

While the course was successful, I do think there are several areas of its design that I should revisit. The primary change I will make with the course is to offer a wider range of readings in composition pedagogy. As I mentioned above, Peter Elbow’s *Everyone Can Write* was the primary source I used in this regard, and while several of the essays in this collection directly reflect the thinking I intended my students to connect with their own developing identities as writers and teachers of writing, students were overall resistant to Elbow’s work. One reason might be because we used the book almost exclusively during the first half of the semester, when students were initially being introduced to the idea of composition scholarship. Another reason, related to the first, is that Elbow’s book is long (it contains over twenty essays) and might intimidate novice teachers of writing. To remedy this problem, I would select only one or two of Elbow’s essays and pair them with a handful of other essay-length works that reflect a wider range of voices in composition scholarship. With that said, my students highly enjoyed the Atwell and Newkirk collection, the one book I thought students would resist because of its age, but instead they responded positively to the range of teacher voices in the text. They also enjoyed Lamott’s book, especially her use of personal narrative. Perhaps, then, my students were simply resistant to formal, academic writing? This might have been the case,
at least until they were given the freedom to choose scholarship themselves to read for the Praxis Report. In fact the Praxis Report was probably the most useful assignment students completed in the course because it showed them how scholarly resources can be consulted to enhance one’s teaching. I did notice, however, that student engagement with this assignment was relative to the appropriateness of the journal they chose to study. While I encouraged students to locate journals that were designed for practicing teachers, I granted leeway, allowing students to use journals intended for scholarly audiences. This was a mistake. At least five to six students in the course selected journals that feature empirical research methodologies, which turned out to be difficult for these non-specialists to process in terms of applicability to their teaching. Despite its importance, research of this nature tends to be produced for fellow specialists and, as such, often relies on jargon-heavy description that is sometimes resistant to narrative interpretation. For example, as one student remarked about *The Journal of Early Childhood Research*, the text she initially selected for the Praxis Report, the articles in this journal are “impossible to follow.” The point of the Praxis Report is to show students that engaging, useful research produced for practicing teachers does exist, and it is there for the taking. In the end, those students who selected journals written for specialized scholarly audiences did not have the kind of experience with the Praxis Report as did those students who selected journals written by and for teachers. While I do not want to imply that empirical researchers are not teachers, or that empirical researchers are incapable of writing for non-scholarly audiences, my experience confirms that such research is too complex for students to tackle in the context of English 341, and the Praxis Report assignment in particular.

As I’ve tried to convey, my approach to the course is rooted in a philosophy of teaching composition that values consequential reflection. One of the hurdles I had to confront was how to teach the teaching of writing to a group of pre-service educators who would be teaching a wide-range of students with vastly different levels of experience. What I did not want to do is design a pedagogy course rooted in current-traditional rhetoric, which, as David Russell reminds us, “sets out to provide students with discrete information and skills, organized systematically, that they can retrieve and apply to any situation requiring communication” (175–76). Moreover, and more to the point, such a course would be practically impossible to undertake because, after all, how does one provide current-traditional writing instruction to a future early childhood teacher that is also relevant for a future middle level math teacher? My attitude had to change and that change was facilitated by adopting a Freirian conception of praxis informed by the values of North American pragmatism, including the belief that instruction is only valuable to the extent that it is useful. In Eng-
lish 341, this method was enacted through course readings, discussions, and writing assignments that challenged students to balance their own experience as writers with questions about and visions for what writing might look like in their future classrooms. Exploring the tensions and anxieties that naturally result from this kind of inquiry is what gives a course like this one its mediating quality, pushing students to think consequently about what they read and write in the course. Indeed, what I’ve learned from teaching English 341 is that it doesn’t matter how a teacher labels her pedagogy or where she locates it within an existing tradition of composition theory, so long as she recognizes that encouraging students to take risks in their writing is what prompts them to internalize the power of writing itself, especially as a resource for engaging the untested feasibility of their learning. In short, it is not enough to construct a pedagogy course that balances theory with practice, especially when we recognize that the best pedagogy courses are the ones in which students harness the power of pragmatic inquiry to transform those limit-situations that encourage us to dichotomize theory and practice from the start.

Works Cited


English 341: Advanced Composition for Teachers

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“Teacher: one who carries on his [or her] education in public.”  
—Theodore Roethke

Welcome!

This is an advanced writing course designed for future educators and those interested in the vocation of teaching. The two keywords in the name of this course are “advanced” and “teaching,” so let me specify what this means for us.

- You are a fairly competent writer who is ready to exert the necessary labor to become a better writer. This means you are committed to pushing yourself into uncomfortable territory that might at times feel exasperating. As well you will seek additional support when needed, especially when suggested by me, your instructor.
- Since this is a 300-level class, you are prepared to be a fully engaged student in the course. There will be a healthy amount of reading and writing, and you should commit to fulfilling the work required of you. Moreover, you are capable of working with others (you do want to be a teacher, after all), so this means you will encourage and respond to one another as the semester proceeds.
- You are nursing an interest in becoming a teacher. Some of you may be wholly committed to such a vocation, while others of you may just be testing the water. Regardless you are ready to devote a semester to thinking, reading, and writing about the work of literacy and learning, especially when it comes to using writing in the classroom.

Course Goals

Each of us brings different experiences to this course as well as different visions about the art of teaching, so part of our work in this class will be to build a community of learners who foster a sense of shared concern. In other
words, we are here to learn from one another. In addition, we will tackle the following goals together:

When it comes to teaching…
- To complicate and further our definitions of literacy and how we communicate its personal, academic, and public value.
- To ask questions about and reflect on the role of writing in the work of education, and how to encourage students across grade levels to experiment with and benefit from writing and its challenges.
- To develop strategies for using writing as a method for reflection and discovery in the classroom.

When it comes to (your) writing…
- To build on our existing knowledge of how writing works, as well as how to build productive interventions into each of our unique habits of composing.
- To further our experience as writers aware of the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of composing.
- To develop an enhanced appreciation for writing as both an interpretative and productive art, one that affects how we think about, observe, and act in the world around us.

Course Texts

Everyone Can Write by Peter Elbow (Oxford UP)
Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott (Anchor Books)
Understanding Writing by Thomas Newkirk and Nancie Atwell, eds. (Heinemann)

PDFs:
If you want to be a writer, you must do two things about all others: read a lot and write a lot. There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut.

—Stephen King

**Assignments and Grading**

- Literacy Narrative 15%
- Failure Essay 15%
- Praxis Report 20%
- Professional Portfolio 25%
- Class Citizenship 15%
- Mid-term Exam 5%
- Final Exam 5%

**Course Schedule**

Note: UW = Understanding Writing

**Week 1**

- **Tuesday**  Introductions/Review Syllabus
- **Thursday**  Read: Matthews, “A Child Composes” *(UW)*

**Week 2**

- **Tuesday**  Read: Lamott, Introduction and “Getting Started”
- **Thursday**  Read: Durst, “Oscar’s Journal” *(UW)*

**Week 3**

- **Tuesday**  Read: Elbow, “Closing My Eyes As I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience” AND Lamott, “Perfectionism”
- **Thursday**  Read: Simmons, “The Writer’s Chart to Discovery” *(UW)*

**Week 4**

- **Tuesday**  Full rough draft of Becoming a Teacher Essay due (bring hard-copy)
- **Thursday**  Revised version of Becoming a Teacher Essay due

**Week 5**

- **Tuesday**  Read: Elbow, “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard: Reflections on the Inability to Write”
- **Thursday**  Read: D’Ambrosio, “Second Graders Can So Write” *(UW)*
Week 6
Tuesday  Read: Elbow, “Freewriting and the Problem of Wheat and Tares”
         AND Lamott, “Shitty First Drafts”
Thursday Read: D’Ambrosio, “Second Graders Can So Write” (UW)

Week 7
Tuesday  Read: Lamott, “Short Assignments” and “Polaroids” AND Elbow, the three short reflections in “Fragments” section of Part II
         Full rough draft of Failure Essay due
Thursday Failure Essay Workshop

Week 8
Tuesday  Failure Essay due
Thursday Read: Bonin, “Beyond Storyland” (UW)

Week 9
Tuesday  Read: Elbow, “The War Between Reading and Writing” AND Adams, “Theoretical Approaches to Reading Instruction” (PDF)
Thursday Read: Moll and González, “Lessons from Research with Language-Minority Children” (PDF)

Week 10
Tuesday  Meet in Library
Thursday Bring Praxis Report journal articles to class

Week 11
Tuesday  Read: Lamott, “Looking Around” and “Broccoli” AND Elbow, “The Uses of Binary Thinking”
Thursday Rough drafts of two article summaries due

Week 12
Tuesday  No Class! (Fall Break)
Thursday Individual Conferences

Week 13
Tuesday  Praxis Report due
Thursday Read: Brandt, “Sponsors of Literacy” (PDF)

Week 14
Tuesday  Read: Sample teaching philosophies (PDF)
Thursday No Class! (Thanksgiving Break)
Supplemental Materials

On Becoming a Teacher Essay

Description
Throughout this semester, we will be thinking about, studying, and discussing what it means to be a teacher. One of the most important ways to prepare for this vocation is to articulate a sense of what you believe teaching is, why it is important, and how you are coming to construct an identity as a teacher. As the quotation on the top of our course syllabus testifies, a teacher is one who carries on his or her education in public. To this end, the first assignment asks you to do some public articulation via an essay about what you think it means to become a teacher. Your charge is to think hard about why you want to enter the teaching profession. Then, focus on one or two experiences you’ve had that inform your desire to become a teacher. Tell us about these experiences in a narrative format while also expanding on a belief or two about teaching itself that these experiences have encouraged you to develop. Feel free to imitate Anne Lamott’s style of writing in Bird by Bird. In particular, study how she uses personal narrative to convey particular lessons or ideas about the vocation of writing in general, but focus your writing (of course) around the vocation of teaching.

Evaluation Criteria
Your “On Becoming a Teacher” essay will be evaluated on the following criteria:

• Your essay focuses on a specific event or experience and details that event or experience in narrative form. In other words, make sure you provide enough details so readers can adequately follow your writing.
• You use whatever event or experience you write about to introduce and expand upon a particular belief or ideal about teaching, one that you believe is important for the teaching profession in general.
• You have organized and edited your essay in a manner that makes it appropriate for a public of your peers. This means the essay is well organized (see models), clearly written, and free of grammar errors.

Failure Essay

Description
The stuff of education involves both successes and failures, hits and misses, trial and error. When it comes to storytelling, and essay writing, the failures are often more interesting and generative than the successes. For this essay, think about a time in your life when you failed and write about it. But don’t romanticize this experience; don’t spin your writing in terms of a “here's what I learned from this failure” sort of frame. Let your failure be a failure. Don’t aim for resolution.

**Evaluation Criteria**

Your failure essay will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Building on the skills you practiced in your first essay, you blend narrative composition with reflective writing to shape a well-organized essay that focuses on a singular event that you identify as a failure.
- Within your writing, you convey why this experience can be considered a failure, which will require you to reflect on and define what you consider the idea of “failure” to mean in the first place.
- Your essay has an original title, is at least 1200 words in length, and has been carefully revised and edited for an audience of your peers.

**Praxis Report**

**Description**

For the Praxis Report, you will examine recent issues of an academic journal that is relevant to your field of study and locate articles that not only interest you, but also provide informed strategies, theory, advice, etc. for educators like yourself.

There will be several components of your report. They are:

1. An overview of an academic journal of your choice (one that is relevant to you as a teacher) that also includes a summary of your experience reading several of this journal’s back issues.
2. Three article responses in which you (1) summarize a specific article from that journal, (2) reflect on its value for you as a teacher, and (3) offer a brief set of 2–4 discussion questions that might spark an engaging conversation with other teachers about the article’s topic.
3. A praxis document that outlines and describes one activity, assignment, or other classroom-based practice that you think reflects or builds upon the advice, theory, inquiry or pedagogy, you learned about in at least one of the articles you reviewed.

**Evaluation Criteria**

Your Praxis Report will be evaluated on the following criteria:
• The introduction to your report not only introduces us to your academic journal (Who sponsors it? Who is its primary audience? What kind of research gets published in it?), but also explains why you selected this journal and why you think it is valuable for a future teacher like yourself.

• In each of your three article reviews you do the following, and in this order: summarize the article, explain why you find this article interesting, and speculate about its potential value for a teacher like yourself.

• Your praxis document clearly outlines and explains a specific classroom-based activity, and you provide a detailed introduction to this activity in which you explain how at least one of the articles you reviewed informs and/or justifies this activity.

• Your final report is consistently formatted, carefully edited, and presented professionally in a folder or small binder (include a title page).