

Dr. Amy Goodburn

English 4/882: "Literacy Issues and Community"

Fall 1997 Number of Students: 13 Number of Evaluations: 13

Commentary

Course Goals

This new course is the result of a Vice Chancellor's Comprehensive Education Grant that Joy Ritchie and I received two years ago to create an Integrative Studies Course that would connect students to communities beyond the classroom by providing opportunities for students to either write for a community or workplace organization or to do some other form of literacy work within a community or school context. As the syllabus states, other course goals included helping students develop awareness about current literacy theories and issues within the U.S. and to enable them to interpret their own literacy history in light of these theories. Not only was the topic of the course new, but the inclusion of service-learning projects or internships for academic credit was also a new venture. And, for me as a teacher, the combination of undergraduates and graduate students within a 4/800 level class was also a new experience. In assessing the success of this course, then, I am conscious of a variety of factors that shaped its development and the ways that my role as a teacher affected its outcome.

Initially I had hoped that students' internships would focus explicitly on literacy and that they would have opportunities to utilize strategies and discussions we had in class to further reflect upon their experiences and to help them work with the learners. As soon as the class began, however, I realized the extent to which structural and institutional factors as well as students' motivations would complicate these idealized goals. To begin with, very few students who enrolled in this class knew that there was a literacy internship component. In the course descriptions, the title "Literacy and Community Issues" was shortened to "Literacy & Comm.," which most students said that they interpreted as "communication" rather than community. Few students had read the detailed course description provided by the English department and subsequently had not contacted me prior to taking the course so that we could arrange suitable internship placements beforehand. These logistical and structural issues occupied much of our early time together, highlighting the difficulties involved in any course which attempts to incorporate service-learning components.

As the semester progressed and students became more involved in their internships, two more philosophical concerns arose regarding what students were learning in the academic content of the course versus their internships. First, many students experienced dissonance in how literacy was defined in their internships vs. what we, as a class, named and valued as literacy. In analyzing this tension, one student described the class as a "discussion or inquiry" about literacy where we focus on asking questions--how is literacy connected to community? What are the ethics involved in literacy learning and in literacy work? and What are the consequences of defining literacy as a valuable cultural commodity--in ways that participants in their internship settings either haven't considered or are not interested in pursuing. He suggested that his own internship setting viewed literacy as "directive," with mantras such as "literacy equals economic success," "parents should read to their children," "society needs more literate readers" rather than questioning some of the assumptions upon which these directives are based. This dissonance sometimes led students to feel the academic content and their projects were contradicting, rather than complimenting, each other. For instance, a student who designed a

web page for the Lincoln Literacy Council struggled between using the organization's discourse to further the goals he believed in while, at the same time, questioning the middle-class values and "directive" literacy messages that he believed the organization was sending. On the one hand, he realized that the Council's pamphlets were effective in appealing to public audiences for funds and in attracting clientele to the organization, but on the other hand he worried that this language was ultimately perpetuating myths about literacy that he wanted to challenge. I hadn't conceptualized the class in this oppositional way, but this student's analysis does provide one way of naming students' frustration when they went into their literacy sites--there was tension between the definitions we used and the assumptions we had about literacy and the ways that organizations outside the class defined, taught, and valued literacy.

The second philosophical issue is tied to the first but also extends beyond the focus on literacy to speak to the goals of service learning in general. Some students' internship experiences challenged their notions of privilege and their desires to "teach" or serve others in ways that were disorienting and threatening to them. Indeed, raising questions about the value of service learning and examining our assumptions about "who is serving who" was central to the course (and planned on my part, through the incorporation of readings about the politics of service work and the relationship to literacy work). But I hadn't anticipated that these discussions and students' internship experiences would lead them to feel betrayed about what they had initially hoped to do within their settings. For instance, three students who worked at the Clyde Malone Community Center had painful and frustrating experiences in feeling not valued as volunteers because of their race and their positions as University students. They wrote and talked about the differences between how they and "regular" volunteers were treated. While this experience was exceedingly frustrating and painful for them, I think it was ultimately productive in terms of highlighting connections between literacy and community and in showing in concrete ways how literacy is connected to race and power and authority. Still, though, they learned more about the politics of race and community than about how to "teach" literacy in this particular setting, which had been their initial expectation. Their experiences raised issues for me as the teacher who had advocated this site as a possible literacy internship, raising questions for me about my goals in having students work in community settings to begin with. Was my goal to have students actually "practice" the literacy strategies that they were learning with participants in the different settings or was it enough that students were experiencing the politics of literacy work? Was it ethical for me as a teacher to promote this type of experience for students with the knowledge that they might not be accepted by the community and knowing that they were having frustrating feelings about not doing the job they expected and wanted to do? While one student said that the experience had been ultimately valuable to him because it had taught him about the politics of community ownership (and he was planning to go to graduate school in Community and Regional Planning), the two others were not really willing to or able to confront their own raced positions of privilege as white university students, and thus became hostile to the "reverse racism" that they felt they were encountering. In this case, their frustrations were directed toward the organizer of the program, whom they felt should create a more positive atmosphere for the different volunteer groups. For their final project, these students wrote a report describing their frustrations and suggesting changes that the director of the program might make, but their unwillingness to acknowledge "the race issue" (their words) in their analysis was troubling to me as a teacher concerned about the relations between literacy workers and the learners they serve. In the future, I think the course syllabus needs to provide more space for these types of discussions to occur, and I, as a teacher, need to do a better job of conceptualizing issues that might occur in students' placements before they lead to conflict among students and community participants.

Class Dynamics and Environment

Overall the class dynamics seemed to grow and develop so that by the end of the semester, students seemed genuinely comfortable with and supportive of one another. Frequently students commented on how this class seemed different in tone from their other courses, perhaps because there was so much discussion about their experiences or because they were sincerely interested in hearing about and learning from the struggles that their classmates faced in their internships. At first I was worried about the diversity of the population in the course and I struggled with how to "pitch" the course to both undergraduate and graduate students, only two of whom had had previous coursework in literacy studies. While some of the undergraduates did seem to invest less time and intellectual energy in the course (especially the five students who were graduating during this semester), for the most part I think there was a genuine exchange of learning between and among students and me. In fact, two of the undergraduates were stronger than some of the graduate students in terms of their writing and the questions that they posed about course material.

In terms of my facilitation of class dynamics, I tried to be more overt in structuring discussions along general lines of inquiry than I have been in the past. For instance, in the early weeks I asked the class to define literacy through in-class writing and small groups, but once their definitions were on the board, I divided them into larger categories that scholars in literacy studies have found useful. I always struggle with the tension between providing lectures about a subject beforehand vs. letting students generate their own ideas and build upon their experiences about a topic. Having now taught this course, I can more easily imagine other mini-lectures and conceptual frameworks that would be useful for students to have prior to reading the course texts. On some days I really had to work to synthesize students' contributions to discussions because the diversity of their experiences and their interests sometimes led to a sense of diffuseness. I think I'm getting better at knowing when to cut students off when their contributions are so off-base that they detract from other students' learning vs. acknowledging and affirming student comments that might seem off-track but oftentimes raise larger or different questions that we should be addressing. Being able to synthesize students' contributions in terms of course content is one skill that I am constantly reflecting upon.

Course Activities and Assignments

Because we met only once a week for almost three hours, the class was generally divided into two components--student led discussions and activities on the assigned readings (beginning in week 4) followed by a break and then another hour and a half of activities, small groups, and/or discussions that I facilitated. In assessing the use of student-generated discussion activities in my "Politics of Literacy" seminar last spring, I commented upon the ways that they often became too "presentation-oriented" without allowing ample time for discussion or synthesis of ideas. I tried to prevent this from happening this semester by providing a handout that outlined my expectations more concretely and by modeling several activities in the first three weeks that students could use--small groups, in-class writing, generative brainstorming, etc. In general, I think students made more attempts to ground their activities within the course readings and to allow time for discussion, although some of the activities were too unstructured, leading to tangents that were not as productive for learning.

The most successful activities that I used connected with students' interests and built upon contemporary local and national discussions about literacy. One highly successful activity was a class meeting with Denny Taylor, an international literacy activist and researcher who

came to UNL as a visiting scholar. Because I was involved with arranging Taylor's visit, I was able to arrange a class potluck with her, during which time students shared their internship projects and asked questions about her books which we had read as a class (*Many Families*, *Many Literacies* and *Toxic Literacies*). Students' comments in their midterm course assessments were overwhelmingly positive about this experience. Also, the whole class attended a lecture by Jonathon Kozol, who fortunately was also visiting campus this semester. Some students were so inspired by his talk that they began reading and discussing his most recent book, *Amazing Grace*. In addition, Patsy Vinogradov, the Refugee Literacy Coordinator of the Lincoln Literacy Council (and a former student of mine), presented a lecture on the needs of refugee literacy learners in Lincoln, which students said that they found engaging and informative.

Another successful class activity was the use of self-selected readings within small groups toward the end of the semester. Students said that they appreciated being able to choose readings on topics in which they were interested and which connected to their final course projects. While it was initially difficult to organize these groups (because of the diversity of their interests and difficulty in arranging enough copies of texts for them to read), I believe that they were useful to students and connected philosophically with many of the literacy issues of ownership and choice that we discussed throughout the semester.

The use of journals on students' internships vs. response papers on assigned course texts was both useful and problematic. On the syllabus I had included prompts for students to respond to which attempted to bridge connections between the class texts and their internship experiences, but some students struggled to make these connections except in the most cursory ways. Some students felt it was more productive to write two journals—one for the internship and one for the readings—which challenged my view of how the course was attempting to synthesize these two components in a meaningful way. One problem was that I didn't have readily available models for the type of synthesis that I had hoped for (because this course was being taught for the first time). Throughout the semester I copied students' journals and intend to create a packet for future classes that will illustrate the range of reflection and synthesis in which students can engage. But in a larger sense, this split between the academic content and the internship reflections points to more philosophical and conceptual questions that I need to think about regarding how to more concretely imagine the usefulness of literacy projects in this course.

The range and diversity of students' final course projects also challenged me in terms of evaluation. One type of project involved the development of materials for the specific settings in which students interned accompanied by an analysis of the processes and issues that students faced in developing such materials. For instance, Bridget designed a brochure for the pediatric clinic for children with disabilities where she interned, a brochure that is being printed and distributed to doctors' offices as a means of advertising the clinic's services. Aaron wrote an employee handbook for the bar where he works while Chad designed a web page for the Lincoln Literacy Council. And Matt and Kelly collaboratively wrote a memo to the director of the Malone Center outlining suggestions on how to make the AmeriCorps program more successful with respect to tutor training. For these students' projects, part of the evaluation seemed to require knowledge about the materials usefulness within the particular settings (i.e. the fact that Aaron's handbook was introduced at an employee/employer meeting and that multiple copies are now being produced for employees as part of their training or that Bridget's brochure was enthusiastically received by the clinic's staff) more than my own sense of the texts' quality according to academic standards of good writing.

Other students wrote more formal seminar papers about specific issues that they faced in their internships. Sara wrote about issues of authority and reciprocity that she encountered in a

failed tutoring relationship with an ESL speaker while Kevin analyzed the success of a collaborative pairing of his 150 students with fifth-graders from a local elementary school. Still other students created extensive annotated bibliographies of readings about literacy accompanied by metacommentary on the major issues they saw emerging. Stephen's bibliography was geared toward developing a topic for his honors thesis on issues of social power and linguistic competence while Denise's bibliography focused on Native American literacy and community issues accompanied by a syllabus she created for a course on Native American culture and literature. Even though these projects were more familiar in terms of evaluation practices, I still struggled with evaluating them in terms of each other, particularly when the students were at such different levels of writing and academic study to begin with (advanced English Ph.D. students vs. undergraduate juniors majoring in political science, for instance). And still other projects were difficult to categorize because students were struggling to synthesize their interests in community literacy with more experimental types of writing. For instance, Crystal attempted to write a narrative of her family's experiences with literacy by chronicling the family and community response to her younger brother's illness. While she was able to articulate in class the connections she saw between the course readings and discussions and her memories of her family's experiences, her narrative doesn't explicitly address these issues. In a similar vein, Lynn wrote about her experiences with being a leader of a community planning board for a new library in Seward, describing the goals of the board, and her views about what a library should be within a community. But, again, this text didn't quite fit my expectations of what final project should be—a synthesis and record of one's learning within the course as it applies to a particular topic of interest to that student. Part of the problem might have been the lack of models for students (since this was the first time I taught the course, I didn't have prior student projects to share) or the lack of concentrated focus in the course itself—the scope of the course was so diverse that students might have had difficulty in conceptualizing how to tie together their interests in such a synthesizing way. And yet I strongly believe in providing students with multiple choices for their projects (instead of requiring a formal paper of a set page length, for instance). Students' ownership in their projects—and in the class in general—was strong and despite the difficulties I faced in assessing and evaluating their learning, I believe this project format worked in allowing students to think deeply and critically about their learning. In a sense, the issues I faced in evaluating their projects echoed the larger issues we discussed throughout the semester regarding how literacy is defined and evaluated, both in schools and in larger social contexts. In the future, though, I want to make more explicit my expectations regarding the integration of course materials within their analysis and writing.

Future Plans

In considering how I would restructure this course differently, I plan to focus on four areas: 1) more literature and discussion about service learning and how I conceptualize it as connected to academic inquiry in the class; 2) better coordination and follow-up on the students' internships and more "group" placements so that students can collaboratively reflect and share with one another; 3) more focus early on with family literacy and concrete strategies to support such literacies; and 4) more integration of students' journals in class activities and more modeling of student writing about internship experiences. On a philosophical level, I am continuing to explore the goals I have in mind for these internship experiences, particularly the similarities and differences between literacy tutoring vs. writing for community organizations. While students in this class participated in both types of experiences, the focus of the course stayed primarily on

discussions about literacy and thus were more directed toward those working as tutors or teachers.

Beyond improving the teaching of this particular course, this class has also spurred several research projects about which I am excited. Two graduate students from this class and I wrote a proposal for the National NCTE conference in November about the politics of service learning from the students and community agencies' perspectives. We also are planning to collaboratively author an article about issues arising from this class for either *CCC's* or *English Education*. In addition, two undergraduate students from this class plan to present the findings from their research projects at the Spring Undergraduate Research Conference. I believe that this activity suggests that students did find this course valuable in terms of their professional growth.

Assessment of Students' Evaluations

Overall I am pleased with the students' assessments. The statistical breakdown of all 5's except for 4 for "the quality of course writing" suggests that students found this course useful and productive, and I think students pinpointed many issues that I've already discussed in my own assessment. My sense that some students had trouble making connections between their internships and the academic content was mirrored in comments such as the course was "too theoretical" and "need to relate internships to class more," but others seemed to make these connections, saying that the course was "a chance to learn theory, then have real life experiences to back it up." My sense that I did a better job of structuring discussions (as compared to the "Politics of Literacy" class I taught last spring), was also reinforced by comments such as she "controls the classroom enough to promote relevant and productive discussions but allows for a diversity of opinion and encourages students to engage in discussions without restrictions" and "the course was highly organized, yet the teaching style was not rigid." I agree with those who said that my evaluative criteria for response papers could have been made clearer. Part of the difficulty in articulating such criteria stemmed, I think, from the vast differences I saw in students' writing abilities—not surprising for a class consisting of junior and senior undergraduates and then advanced Ph.D. students (surprisingly, there was only one master's student). I think providing a packet of this past class's writing as a model will be useful in future teaching of this class. The comment I enjoyed most was "She was the matriarch of our community—but without the noise and fanfare." I'm not quite sure what this student meant but it made me laugh out loud. The comment I wanted to hear more about was from the student with the most negative assessment. I would like to know why she/he felt the course didn't have a focus and how I might have created one that would have been more useful for him/her. For the most part, I think the students' comments validate my own sense that the classroom felt like a supportive community where people could share and learn from their experiences. I believe I did generate some enthusiasm and curiosity about the topic of literacy, and I hope this class is scheduled again soon. Despite the lower than expected enrollment, I believe this course was viewed as very worthwhile by the students who took it, and I think it connects well to the English Department curriculum and to the university's mandate land-grant mission. Given all the current efforts to support service learning at UNL, I believe this course is a useful model for other faculty to consider.