

Job-Search Portfolio
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English 309 Advanced Composition: Narrative

Goals

Advanced Composition is an upper-level course that students elect to take in fulfilling the university general education writing requirement. The course goals, as articulated by the composition program, include developing students' ability to write in a variety of academic genres; developing and practicing students' writing processes and developing rhetorical awareness as a reader and a writer. Besides these overarching goals, this course was scheduled for the department's computer classroom, so we also focused on negotiating electronic communication and electronic texts. Although I was an experienced teacher, this course presented some new challenges for me. It was my first time teaching an upper level course, which meant I had to design and prepare the course from scratch while being sure to expect the appropriate quantity and quality of work. It was also my first time teaching a five-week summer course, which meant I had to adjust to teaching the same class, five days a week for an hour and a half a day. Finally, it was my first time teaching a computer-assisted class in a networked lab, which required me to focus on integrating the electronic component to enhance achievement of the goals.

Course Activities

With all of these new experiences facing me, I chose a familiar topic—education—for the course theme. To provide some sense of coherence to the course, we read, wrote, and discussed topics in education. To this end, I compiled a course packet of readings from a variety of academic texts on education, including work by Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, Lisa Delpit, and Shirley Brice Heath. Students discussed both the content and form of these texts, always going back to a central question: As writers, what can we learn from this text? In our discussions, we used a variety of formats including traditional face-to-face, an asynchronous class listserv, synchronous chat programs, small groups, and e-mail. Part of our ongoing discussion was on the strengths and weaknesses of these different forums.

Our first major writing assignment was a personal essay from the writer's educational experience. Although narrating the experience was part of the assignment, the essay also needed to speak to some broader issue and concern in education. Most of the students reported that this was their favorite assignment although they also acknowledged that it was difficult to move beyond strictly narrative. One student wrote about her experience with a summer course that took her sailing and studying in the Galapagos Islands, arguing for more opportunities for non-traditional experiences as part of traditional degree programs. Another woman shared several vignettes from her experiences as an elementary student, a pre-K teacher, and a parent connecting her experiences with those of bell hooks. Although the drafts of these essays were not always consistent and not polished, they did engage students and get them thinking critically about education and their wealth of experience with it.

The next major assignment was a book review. Students chose a book about

education and wrote a critical review focusing on particular issues or concerns from the book. Some of the texts chosen included Mike Rose's *Possible Lives*, bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, and E.D Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. Other students chose to read books less well known but that addressed familiar topics such as ESL, afrocentricity, and alternative schools. I encouraged students to choose books that might help them in preparing for their research essay, which was the final essay. Students had been reading and writing responses to the course readings all semester so they had practice with analyzing and critiquing (instead of merely summarizing)—as well as feedback from me—which reinforced the skills necessary for this assignment.

The third major assignment was one we started the first week of class: writing a paper about an educational listserv that each student was required to find, join, and monitor/participate on. The purpose of this assignment was to get students exploring the internet, looking for possible lists, learning to subscribe to a list, and more importantly, analyzing the language and communication of its postings. Again, students were encouraged to find a list about their research topic, or, at least one that they had a professional interest in. After resistance, delays, and frustrations (due in some part to the network crashing), most students were successful. None of the students had ever heard of listservs or electronic discussions and most had not even activated their student e-mail accounts before this class. One student joined an international chemical engineering listserv based at U of L. As a chemistry major, she was fascinated by U of L's role in it, but she was also intimidated because of the level of discourse, the technical complexity of the topics, and the worldwide audience. Another student, a psychology major, ended up joining nine psychology lists, realizing that these may be useful resources in his search for graduate schools or jobs. As a whole, these listserv reports were the most enjoyable to read as students had some fun with the writing while still fulfilling the purpose of the assignment.

The final writing project was a documented essay. Students could choose any topic related to education that they were interested in. Although research is difficult in a five-week course, most students ended up getting involved in topics with which they had strong personal ties. For example, one student, an international student from the Dominican Republic, decided to research bilingual education in the United States because he was planning to stay in this country but wanted his children to be bilingual in Spanish and English. The end of the semester focused on preparing the writing portfolios for grading through workshops and conferences. Students wrote reflective essays to introduce their portfolio, to explain their writing processes, and to demonstrate achievement of the course goals.

Self-Evaluation

My feelings about the class were mixed: the students were engaged, they did the work, attended all the classes, and seemed genuinely interested in learning. I really enjoyed working with them. However, because of the compressed time frame, I felt—and they expressed—frustration in trying to fulfill the writing requirements, specifically the research and revisions. Adding to the frustration were the technical difficulties we experienced: the lab crashed the day before the term started so that we couldn't use it at all the first week and a half, and it was not restored to full capacity during the term. The most successful part of the course was the students' engagement with the texts and their

writing topics.

English 309: Student Evaluations

I have enclosed both discursive comments and the multiple-choice evaluations that are required by U of L, both of which are completed anonymously at the end of the semester. Only 4 of the 8 students enrolled in the class took advantage of the opportunity to complete the evaluations although class time was provided for this activity as required by university policy. Below are typed versions of all the discursive comments that I received for this class. Students wrote in response to the following prompts: 1) Comment on the course materials, amount of material covered, and so forth. Do you have any suggestions for improvement? 2) Comment on the style, enthusiasm, etc. of the instructor. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

“The best thing about the structure of the course was the portfolio. I really was able to appreciate my progress when I was putting it together. This is one of the few courses that I have left feeling I have improved permanently. My writing is a lot better now.”

“I found the instructor to enjoy our meetings. She seemed to be comfortable with the class and the discussions. She did challenge us a lot during the semester but it was worth it. I enjoyed this class as much as I did because of the teaching style and enthusiasm of the instructor. She read all the assignments we had to read and appeared really involved in the discussions not aloof like some other teachers I've had.”

“I really liked the way the class was organized. The discussions of the readings were very beneficial and I liked the way you let the class decide the direction of the conversation. This class was organized around the student as well as the coursework and I liked the type of teaching that accompanied it.”

“I would have liked to have more time with the computer work, but was glad that it was that that was cut instead of in class work time (due to short summer session).”

“I do think that in a summer class there was too much outside classwork to do. If the person is trying to carry two classes it is almost impossible to get everything done. In a regular semester I think it would be no problem.”

“I think Ms. O'Neill is a wonderful instructor. She is willing to work with you in anyway. She is very direct in what is expected from you, which I like. I am very pleased that it was Ms. O'Neill who was teaching this class.”

“Lot of material and work although it was a 5-week course.”

“Really open to our opinions and reactions. Very helpful in answering questions and giving constructive feedback.”