

WRTG 310 - Methods for Teaching High School Composition Course Design

Preparing students for teaching composition at the secondary level is a daunting responsibility given the complex interaction of pedagogical theories, practical approaches and classroom ‘performance’ levels that are involved. Teaching composition in today’s fast moving and technologically challenging world requires an ability to design assignments that engage many different modes of writing (descriptive, narrative, evaluative, etc.) for many different purposes (expressive, argumentative, informative, analytical, etc.). The teacher must have a grasp of the underlying pedagogical theories that shape assignments and curriculum, as well as practical knowledge of the learning theories that dictate what kind of classroom atmosphere is most conducive to the development of writing skills. But before engaging in any attempt to teach writing, an activity many theorists (and most experienced composition teachers) will argue is impossible, there has to be some agreed upon definition or description of “good writing.” There needs to be a model that guides the grading decisions made about what is the “correct or incorrect” usage of language. The problem is language has psycholinguistic and social foundations, thus grammar and other writing conventions are socially driven and always changing. The composition teacher is continually trying to describe and model a moving target. When one pulls together all the varying influences on writing instruction in a coordinated attempt to teach high school students how to write a coherent sentence, paragraph or essay, it takes a masterful hand to get the job done.

My approach to *developing* skilled composition teachers is divided into two distinct areas of study that require two very different pedagogical approaches. The first half of the semester is spent studying the underlying influences on composition pedagogy. We study the six primary pedagogical approaches to teaching composition (Expressive, Rhetorical, Collaborative, Process, Cognitive and Computer), the dominant educational paradigm and the most current, psychobiological theories of “learning.” This takes place in a seminar style classroom with assigned readings, some lecture and a great deal of class discussion. There is a mid-term exam, and the students are required to write an eight to ten page research paper on a pedagogical topic of their choice which is due at the end of the semester.

The second half of the semester is conducted as a workshop in which each student must design and teach three writing assignments. Before teaching the assignment, students must give me 1) an explanation of the pedagogical approach to be used, 2) a statement on context; where in the semester would the assignment be given, and why, 3) a description of the assignment and grading rubric, and 4) any handouts. After each assignment is presented/taught, the other members of the class will complete the assignment and turn it in to the student/instructor at the next class with a short, peer critique of the assignment and its presentation. The student will then grade the completed assignments and write a personal critique, explaining whether they feel any changes should be made in the assignment, and why. The three assignments are collected into a portfolio that is turned in at the end of the semester.