English and Theatre Faculty and Staff Research

English and Theatre

10-1-2007

Modeling the Writing Assignment on Literature

Charlie Sweet
Eastern Kentucky University, charlie.sweet@eku.edu

Hal Blythe
Eastern Kentucky University, hal.blythe@eku.edu

Recommended Citation

Modeling the Writing Assignment on Literature

Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet

Charlie has been teaching his junior-level American Lit Survey II for 36 years, but last summer after reflecting on the course with Hal, he decided to try a new way of teaching students to write. He set up critical writing communities in his class and then he created one for himself in order to model a particular writing skill.

In our Department of English & Theatre, we have developed five desired outcomes (SLOs) for every course:

I. Departmental Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will demonstrate the ability to apply criticism/theory to texts; to articulate connections among texts; and to analyze texts—in terms of formal literary elements and in light of rhetorical, historical, and cultural contexts.
2. Students will demonstrate the ability to compose texts in a manner that is effective and appropriate for their selected area within English and Theatre.
3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of literary/rhetorical contexts, periods, genres, theories, and trends.
4. Students will demonstrate the ability to conduct research, to assess sources, to effectively synthesize their ideas with those of others, and to correctly document that research.
5. Students will demonstrate the ability to integrate knowledge across courses: among texts, authorial voices, and diverse positions.

In addition, Charlie has specific objectives that tie to these student learning outcomes:

II. ENG 351 Objectives
Students will demonstrate . . .
1. An understanding of the historical, cultural, and literary trends of post-Romantic American writing. [SLO 3]

2. The ability to read critically and carefully various genresBi.e. essay, poetry, short story, novel. [SLO 1, SLO 2]
3. A knowledge of the literary techniques, strategies, and forms characteristic of various genres. [SLO 3]
4. The ability to read critically—i.e., interpret literature. [SLO 1, SLO 5]
5. A comprehension of various critical approaches to literature. [SLO 3]
6. A knowledge of basic idiosyncratic American forms and themes. [SLO 3]
7. An understanding of the great influence of major writers. [SLO 3]
8. A knowledge of the lasting importance of major movements such as Realism, Naturalism, Confessionalism, and Minimalism. [SLO 3]
9. A knowledge of concepts, facts, etc. that show up on the PRAXIS (one student population). [SLO 3]
10. The rudiments of a scholarly frame of mind. [SLO 1, SLO 2, SLO 3, SLO 4, SLO 5]

The primary assessment tool for these objectives and SLOs is a scholarly note, which is worth 20% of the student's course grade. On the opening day of the semester, Charlie provides his class with a document that states students will produce a "Publishable Note with a Researched Thesis (you must have an original thesis). Think of this paper as written in the style of a 'publishable note' that is to be submitted to an academic journal." In fact, students must submit one copy to Charlie (through Blackboard and its Safe Assignment feature to check for plagiarism) and one to an academic journal (providing Charlie with a copy of the email submission).

We developed the scholarly note writing assignment over the years as appropriate for junior-level classes [see our "Course Writing Objectives and London's 'Law of Life'." *Eureka Studies In Teaching Short Fiction* 5.1 (2004): 16-9 and "Using Mason's 'Shiloh' to Teach a Scholarly Frame of Mind." *Eureka Studies In Teaching Short Fiction* 5.2 (2005): 39-46]. And while Charlie has had some success in undergraduate students actually getting published, only one student seeing print per semester (certainly a measurable objective) didn't seem a high enough quantity. The problem was how to make more students proficient in scholarly note writing.

Together we brainstormed a few ideas and then checked the research for verification. Weinstein et al (2002) state, "We can have a tremendous impact helping students develop a useful repertoire of learning strategies. One of the most powerful ways of teaching these strategies is modeling" (277). Furthermore, Weinstein references Pintrich & Greeno (1994), who claim, "faculty can be models of self-regulated learning . . . . Therefore, we should strive to model discipline-specific thinking processes and course-specific strategies for learning in our classrooms" (276). After noting the "relatively little research on one-on-one teaching methods, McKeachie (2002) posits, "Students are helped by a model of the desired performance. This may be provided by the instructor's demonstration of the technique" (255).

Since we were interested in students learning a specific skill—the scholarly frame of mind, rather than pure acquisition of knowledge—we hypothesized that modeling that skill might enhance student mastery of it. The problem was how to do it. With twenty students in class, Charlie didn't have the time to provide separate tutorials for each student. In previous semesters, he had handed out various models of his own published notes but that seemed insufficient in itself. The answer came from adapting a very successful approach we had used in our creative writing classes.

Long-time opponents of the de facto pedagogical model in creative writing, the workshop approach, we break our fiction-writing courses into what we call triads. Each triad must meet outside of class to discuss each other's work and then in a session with one of us, they must present the strengths and weaknesses of the work to be assessed by our expertise (we are highly published writers with many critical, pedagogical, and creative articles and books).

So last summer was born the idea of the Scholarly Community. This fall Charlie has divided his 18 American Lit students into six triads. Each triad self-selects around a particular work about which that student wishes to write. The students meet as a group to discuss the work, parcel out the research, and peer-review each other's drafts. Importantly, each student must produce a separate paper with a distinctly different hypothesis. We also established a series of progressive due dates so that students had to turn in their basic idea, a summary of a book/article, another summary of a book/article, an outline, a first draft, and a final copy in succeeding weeks. This process helped prevent the "write it all the night before" syndrome as did the communal responsibilities.

Modeling

Once the objectives, the scholarly communities, and the process were established, we set up the model, but we had a bit of trouble with this aspect. We simply couldn't figure how Charlie could model the entire scholarly note process to the class. Then something unforeseen happened that allowed Charlie to model the entire process of writing the scholarly note from invention, to research, to drafting, the final copy, and submission.

Invention

Luck has been described as occurring when preparation meets opportunity. On a theoretical basis we have always thought that scholarship and teaching walked hand in hand. We believe that every day a teacher should come out of every class with at least the glimmer of an idea. Over the course of our career we have published well over 150 articles, and every one has come out of our teaching, from seeing the embryo of an idea in conjunction with an actual class section. Sometimes it's something we say, sometimes it grows out of a response to a student, and sometimes it comes from our discussing a work before or after class.

In this case Charlie was discussing "The Yellow Wall-paper" with his students when he caught a glimmer of an idea. While discussing Gilman's self-conscious use of the Gothic convention of the isolated mansion, he was reminded of the Gothicists' often-used convention in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" that the house equals mind, sometimes the body. That led to a digression on the room wherein the narrator was being kept, the nursery, and why. Especially intriguing is what became the research question: why immediately after birth would a physician keep a patient (his wife in particular) in a room that would constantly remind her of the newborn she was not allowed to see? Charlie had no answer at that time but promised his class he would investigate. From this point on, in order to demonstrate the modeling process, Charlie took over more of the writing process than he usually does.

Research

A few periods later Charlie had his class in a library computer lab in order to demonstrate the most current research strategies available. As his example, he plugged into the various library research engines and databases "The Yellow Wall-paper." Since he had already written an article with Hal and Barbara Szubinska in 2002 on that work, he needed only a search parameter of 2000-2006. Charlie not only found six promising articles, but he was able to print them off.

The next class he brought in his old research file from the previous article plus the new six, all of which he had read over. As a result, he selected three articles from the old file that could be relevant and four of the new six. He demonstrated to his class how all had been read, marginally noted, and underlined. He also pointed out that each time he read through the articles for a new slant (this time, why use the nursery), he used a different color ink.

Drafting

We have always approached writing scholarly papers/articles differently from many of our colleagues; in fact, we use the same pattern that we do with fiction. We believe that if we can craft a good (not perfect) opening paragraph, the rest of the paper will suggest itself. So while his students took their first one hour and fifteen minute test, Charlie wrote a longhand opening paragraph complete with cross-outs, rewrites, and side-notes. The next period he passed out copies of the original paragraph and a title, pointing out that the note was starting to focus on Gilman's birth imagery.

Charlie also sat down with his own triad, Hal and Barbara, and the three of us proceeded to rewrite the piece so as to sharpen its focus. That draft was then passed out to the class.

When the class took test two, Charlie repeated the procedure of writing in front of them, this time finishing almost two handwritten pages. After handing that draft out, he wrote the final part of the paper during their third test. Each time, the "sharpening" process with Hal and Barbara was repeated.

The Final Draft

The final version was written with the entire triad providing input. At this point the "Works Cited" page was added. Various possibilities were discussed, and the main problem was fighting off the urge to develop the note into a longer scholarly article. We did make some notes on future directions for our scholarship, but the emphasis was on getting our mechanics correct, checking our documentation against the MLA style manual, and making certain our organization and evidence supported our thesis.

Submission

While the actual submission of the note came after the final draft, the selection of which journal to submit to was made somewhere in the drafting process. While the subject matter was something about which we had published previously in *Eureka Studies In the Teaching of Short Fiction*, the article had no pedagogical slant and thus was not part of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The articles did not seem right for *American Notes & Queries* as it was more an *explication du texte*, and we had just had one piece accepted by *The Explicator* and had recently sent another to it. It wasn't on a post-1940's work, so it was certainly not an ideal fit for *Notes on Contemporary Literature*. On the other hand, while Gilman's story was technically not a modern discovery a la the bulk of Emily Dickinson's poetry, the scholarship on the story was definitely a modern phenomenon.

We decided to argue that point in a cover email letter to NCL's editor, Bill Doxey, when we sent the note along as an attachment. Moreover, we wanted to suggest to Charlie's students that NCL might be a good venue for their notes.

The Results

Has the experiment worked? Is modeling a value-added approach to teaching our objective of the scholarly frame of mind? We suppose we should wait to finish this article, but by the time students hear about the acceptance/rejection of their submissions and we try to convince them that often even the best articles don't get published immediately, it might be a few years.

The truth is that seeing a piece of scholarship to print is a long process. Importantly, at the same time we are modeling for our students, we are mentoring for the junior faculty in our department. In fact, Barbara was one of our earliest and most successful mentees, and we have already co-authored three published works with her.

In one publishing model, scholars take the first draft of their paper to usually theme-based conferences (e.g., Contemporary Literature), read to a small but dedicated audience, and receive some immediate feedback. The scholars then revise their paper and submit to a selected journal. If the piece is rejected, they often use the reasons for rejection as a springboard for still another re-write, and so forth.

We considered the conference presentation as a possibility for our students, but the only relevant conferences in our area (travel money is already tight and basically non-existent for undergraduate students) are held in the spring, and this experiment took place in the fall. Our department does hold an undergraduate conference and a writing competition for scholarly papers. Charlie's students will be encouraged to enter both.

In the absence of any publication figures, we decided to provide Charlie's grades on his scholarly notes for the past few years. Ideally, if this experiment succeeds, the grades should be higher. After all, Charlie is asking his students for a publishable paper.

Grade	2003	2004	2005	2006
A	6	4	4	5
B	3	7	5	5
C	9	7	6	6
D	1	3	0	1
F	0	0	0	1

As you can tell from the chart, no significant difference evidenced itself, so what do we have other than a new publication. Importantly, however, this experiment also contained what our friends in education research call "an independent variable." During the semester, Charlie unfortunately developed a progressive pain in his neck, shoulder, and arm that resulted in finishing the course a week early (Hal filled in) so he could have a neck operation; as a result of the pain, Charlie did not spend as much time as he would have liked on the scholarly communities. One problem he spotted, for instance, is the students' reluctance to use anything but Internet sources.

Therefore, next semester we will repeat this experiment in his ENG 351 course, hopeful that increased attention to 1) the scholarly communities and 2) books as effective sources will increase the grades.

Works Cited

Hal Blythe, and Charlie Sweet. "Course Writing Objectives and London's 'Law of Life'" *Eureka Studies in the Teaching of Short Fiction* 5.1 (2004): 16-19.

—. "Using Mason's 'Shiloh' to Teach a Scholarly Frame of Mind." *Eureka Studies in the Teaching of Short Fiction* 5.2 (2005): 39-46.

McKeachie, Wilbert. "Using Project Methods, Independent Study, and One-on-one Teaching." *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*. Ed. Wilbert McKeachie. 11th ed. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2002. 250-257.

Pintrich, P. R. *et al. Student Motivation, Cognition, and Learning: Essays in Honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie.* Hillsadale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994.

Weinstein, Claire *et al.* "Teaching Students How to Learn." *McKeachie's Teaching Tips.* Ed. Wilbert McKeachie. 11th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. 270-288.

Guidelines for Submissions

ESTSF will be published in late fall and in spring. The opinions in the articles are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily represent the editors, Eureka College, or any other institution. We seek articles derived from your teaching experience with no endnotes or works cited page OR long articles that are documented with endnotes and a works cited page. Send manuscripts that are typed, double-spaced, very readable, and accompanied by an SASE. Please follow MLA style and send manuscripts to

> ESTSF
> Humanities Division
> Eureka College
> 300 E. College Avenue
> Eureka, IL 61530-1500