

110W Teaching Philosophy

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Underlying Assumptions

I begin each course I teach with some basic assumptions--assumptions about teaching, about writing, about learning, about me as a teacher, about the students in that course. One of the most significant assumptions I make about students in 110W is that they are all highly literate people. They have all graduated from American high schools; they have spent many years writing and reading "school English." If they are from the state of Ohio, they have, in fact, passed the state proficiency test. What we will be about in this class is not "learning how to write." We will be about learning the **conventions** of what is considered good writing and reading **at the university**, at **this** university in particular.

Another assumption I operate out of is that there are standards of "good writing" on this very campus. And that in 10 weeks, we will not be able to investigate each of them. What I hope we will work on is **how** to investigate those ways so that students can move into their other courses in other fields, maybe not knowing the answers but at least having a sense of the questions to ask.

Because I believe writing and reading to be at the heart of much of the learning students will be asked to do at the university, my overall goal for the course is to help students take responsibility for their own learning, to learn that they can be active learners and that they make meaning of what goes on in their classrooms as much as their teachers do. This goal, I think, underlies much of what goes on in my course; it is reflected in concrete ways--in the ways I design writing assignments (including collaborative projects) and in the expectations I have for peer group work.

Writing Assignments

Because this course focuses on investigating communities and their literacy practices, all the writing assignments ask students to look at how groups communicate. In Essay 1, they write about the language practices in a group they belong to. The rest of the quarter, their writing will revolve around one larger project, investigating the literacy and language practices of a community each student or group of students chooses. Students will write a proposal for that project and then, a final write-up (Essay 2). For the final exam, students will look at all of the projects done in class to write about how groups in general operate within sets of literacy conventions.

In all of these assignments, students will be doing research, but rarely will it be the kind that happens with books in a library, finding and quoting from sources. Students may interview members of a community, they may observe or participate in a group, for they may analyze writing of an academic discipline by looking at traditional publications or at ones on the World Wide Web.

My goal for all of these writing assignments is to help students think about how language conventions meet particular needs and for them to practice assessing needs of particular writing situations. How can they use what they know to accomplish this piece of writing? And then, after they have turned in an assignment, what can they learn from it? What can they learn about their own writing processes, about conventions that their classroom has developed, about how to work within those conventions, about when they want to choose to step outside of those conventions?

Peer Groups

Because the peer group meetings are so important to the way 110W works and because the course structure is an unusual one, from the first day on, I emphasize in class how integrated the peer group work is with the more traditional class meetings. We talk about how students are taking one

course; 110W is made up of 3 traditional class meetings and 1 peer group meeting. 193W is only a bureaucratic way of awarding 2 hours of credit based on the intensive work they do in the three class meetings **and** the peer group meeting.

In the peer group meetings, I hope that students will learn to take control of their own learning. I want them to use that time to accomplish what they feel they need to do during that hour or so each week. But just as they are learning other new skills and approaches to reading and writing, learning how to make the group work for them will take practice. Because a number of their past experiences in school have pushed them to focus on doing **exactly** what the teacher wants and to follow formulas for doing so, it often takes a while for students to trust and to feel comfortable taking control themselves.

One of the ways I try to help that process along is by giving them opportunities to think about possibilities for their peer group meetings. I don't, however, give assignments or set up expectations for specific tasks. Before their first peer group meeting, we spend some time in class brainstorming possibilities for things they might do. Several other times during the quarter, on the day before a meeting, I may give groups 5 or 10 minutes at the end of class to work out amongst themselves what they may want to do the next day. My goal for this in-class planning time is to give groups the opportunity to begin thinking about their **options**, rather than appearing in front of the peer writing consultant saying, "Okay, what are we doing today?" In 110W classes I have taught in the past, some groups have chosen to read and respond to each others' drafts one week; another week, they worked on a collaborative writing project; still other weeks, they talked about a discussion that went on in class the day before. If, as I hope, they are grouped by the kinds of projects they will be focusing on, one of the ways this time may be used is to share experiences and challenges for their particular kinds of projects.

As a way of encouraging 110W students to reflect on their work in peer groups, at various points of the quarter, I ask them to write in their journals about working with their group--whatever they want to say--what they like about it, what they don't, etc. The final work of the quarter will ask them to think about how groups operate and how they set up their own conventions, and these journal reflections are important sources of information for that work. An added result of these journals is that they are concrete ways for students to see how integral the peer group meetings are to the 110W class.