

## **Sophomore Literature Teaching Circle Final Report**

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Our teaching circle held four meetings over the course of the 2008-09 academic year. During our first two meetings, in the Fall 2008 semester, we identified several areas that seem to pose particularly serious challenges for instructors teaching 200-level English courses:

- Helping students who arrive in our classrooms with poor basic skills in reading and writing
- Overcoming a lack of student engagement and motivation, which often manifests itself in a reluctance to read
- Making connections to classes in other disciplines and ensuring that the skills that students acquire in these general education classes are reinforced across the curriculum
- Incorporating new technologies and pedagogical strategies into our classrooms

The first two challenges seemed to us to be the most pressing. Therefore, we met with Carol Frazier from Academic Support Services in March to discuss how we can best support underprepared students, especially those who have difficulty reading for comprehension and analysis.

While we do not have definitive solutions to any of these problems, our teaching circle has provided opportunities for us to brainstorm strategies and share pedagogical tactics that have been successful. For example, as a result of our conversations about improving and reinforcing basic skills, I began to incorporate more explicit writing instruction, including individual conferences and peer workshopping of papers, into my second-semester English 202 class this year. I have also tried to do more to engage students with different learning styles by incorporating small-group activities, sound recordings of poetry being read aloud, and images from the visual arts into my teaching. As three of our members are also involved in developing SMART assessment rubrics for the English major, we also found these discussions a useful way to begin defining what we expect our students to do in their literature classes and thinking about how we might assess these skills.

Our final meeting, in April, was a book review session; several members chose an introductory-level textbook about reading and writing about literature to review, and we met to share our impressions of these texts' strengths and weaknesses. Based on the information we shared at this meeting, we have decided to purchase copies of three texts to place on reserve for students, as well as some books about pedagogy for our own use. At this meeting, we also discussed proposed changes in the English composition curriculum and whether a second freshman-level composition course, focused explicitly on writing about literature, might better serve our students' needs than the junior-level, research-paper-focused course we have now. It seems

clear that English 101 does not fully prepare students for the type of reading and writing they need to do in the 200-level courses, and it is difficult to spend much time teaching these skills in survey courses that also include a great deal of content.

Finally, we discussed plans for the following academic year. For many of us, one of the most valuable aspects of the teaching circle has been the opportunity to exchange perspectives and teaching tips with colleagues in other departments. Conversations with our two members from the Department of Sciences and Mathematics have revealed that many of the pedagogical issues that concerned English faculty – improving reading comprehension and writing skills, developing students’ abilities to visualize abstract or hypothetical ideas, striking a balance between emphasizing students’ ability to recall details of the text and teaching higher-level analysis – were also areas of concern for our colleagues in the sciences. This has made it easier for me, at least, to articulate to my students why these courses matter and how the skills we teach in 200-level English classes might translate to their other coursework. We would like to continue these conversations throughout the next academic year, whether in the context of another teaching circle focusing on general education science and math, or one that focuses more broadly on cross-curricular connections.