
*Motives*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1969), and Ann Berthoff (*The Making of Meaning*) urge us to make connections between what people do in their ordinary lives and what written texts do, or ask their readers to do: for Burke, people and texts perform a “grammar of motives”; for Berthoff, people perceive and create form in and through texts. Contemporary ethnographers like Clifford Geertz (*Local Knowledge*, New York: Basic, 1983), and sociolinguists make use of such ideas to interpret human behavior at home and abroad. Studies of human “makings of meaning” (to paraphrase Berthoff) are applicable to compositionists, who wish to help their students bridge the ways meanings are made (and language is used) in their home lives and here at the university.

What has been described so far can lead to method, and our composition theory seminar is certainly designed to show how theory informs method. But offering new methods, even when backed by social constructionist and/or epistemic theories, might only result in a proliferation of methods, or the random supplanting of one method, or approach, with another. Thus, one possible goal of our composition theory seminar could be to replace expressivism with social constructionism. But the course opens with Jay Robinson’s “Literacy in the Department of English,” and gives Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* centrality in order to highlight the political nature of pedagogy. Methods for the teaching of writing express, and arise out of, political commitments. Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist theories, as well as civil rights activism, have made such a perspective difficult to avoid. Our seminar plots points of development for one strand of composition pedagogy—cultural studies—through which students can see how political values help to determine method, assignment-making, program-creation.

Grand Forks, North Dakota

University of Pittsburgh

English 2510: Seminar in Teaching Composition

Joseph Harris

*Syllabus*

**Goals/Course Overview**

Like General Writing (GW), the teaching seminar is part of the common stock of experiences and lore of many people in this department. But since both GW and the seminar center on a commitment to revision, to a rethinking of not only the materials and practices but also the aims of our work as intellectuals, both courses also change from year to year.
We’d like to begin here, then, by briefly sketching out what we want to do this term and why.

The faculty associated with the teaching of writing at many universities often choose to remain carefully absent from the courses taught by a staff of TAs. They offer a selection of texts and a large file of assignments and exercises, and then they just get out of the way. Such programs have the same sort of problem as certain student papers: there are plenty of details but no idea or point of view to give them shape or purpose.

And so we—that is, the faculty in composition at Pitt—have chosen instead to remain strongly present in the courses you will be teaching during your first year here: we will meet regularly in this seminar and as a teaching staff. Faculty and advanced graduate students will also visit your classes and talk with you about your teaching. And there will be many different voices speaking to your students in the assignments and readings that we have given you to work with in your classroom—voices that are clearly not yours and yet against which you will be heard.

This seminar is set up to help you form a stance as a teacher in relation to these competing voices and authorities. If there are voices other than your own speaking in your classroom, then where exactly are you? How do you locate yourself within and against the discourses of the program, the assignments, the readings, and your students in such a way that the course you teach gains a coherence of your own making? These questions parallel those that your GW students will also be facing: How do you write in response to a situation and a task defined by others in such a way that what you have to say suits both their ends and yours? That is, how do you approach what you are being asked to do so that it becomes not alienated labor but real and useful work of your own?

Most of the assignments in this seminar will ask you to define a stance towards the course you are teaching and the students in it, as well as towards the profession you are entering and the texts that we have chosen to represent it. We perhaps should say that we do not imagine this seminar as either an introduction to research in the field of composition studies or as a practicum in a preferred method of teaching writing. We do not, that is, intend to push you out of your classroom and replace you with a standardized set of exercises or lessons that you need only administer. Rather, our hope is to leave you with a better sense of what might be involved—of the sorts of work and thinking to be done, of the kinds of books and articles to be read—in taking yourself seriously as a teacher of writing.

The GW course you will be teaching has plenty of room for both teachers and students to move around in it, to shape things and to take the pleasure that comes from striking their own line, from being able to connect this point, this idea, this theme to the other. The key terms, the central metaphors, the points of transition, the moments to recall—all these will be part of a narrative you compose, day in and day out, as you find a way of talking to students about their work and of showing them how you do yours. Our job in this seminar will be to help you pay attention to that story (and not just to the details of what you need to do from week to week in your classroom), and to make sure that as you tell and revise that story you also have the chance to consider what it says about you, about teaching, and about reading and writing.

Similarly, we have planned our work in this seminar in a way that leaves us a good amount of open time. We have done so largely because we want the seminar to be a place where we can think through questions and issues in teaching GW as they come up, but also because we want you to have time to hear and speak with the various writers and critics who will be coming to the department this term, as well as to bring in other readings and issues for us to discuss. So don’t hesitate to raise any issues in teaching or literacy that you would like us to talk about—or to suggest alternative readings about them.

Assignments/Required Readings
One way of viewing the day-to-day workings of this seminar might be as a continual juxtaposing and contrasting of two sets of texts. The first is a set of readings that we have chosen as instances of familiar and (at least in part) compelling ways of imagining and working on problems central to the teaching of English: how the activities of reading and writing get defined and valued; how they are then represented in the classroom; and how and why those definitions and representations might be changed. These texts are, in the order we plan to take them up:


Near the end of the term, we will also ask you to read and report back to the seminar on one of the following books:

The second is that set of readings, assignments, student writings, and accounts of classroom exchanges that you will need to draw on as you work to turn the unfolding events of the course you are teaching into a story that has some real shape and usefulness, a narrative that you can retell and learn from. In this seminar we will try to bring these two sets of texts together so that each informs and responds to the other.

Much like the students in your GW course, you will also be asked to reflect on what you have been doing in a number of different kinds of writings. You are required to write at least four informal conversation papers throughout the term and to bring copies of them to the seminar for the rest of us to read. We call these writings conversation papers because they are meant give you a way of continuing or redirecting our talk together. We invite you to collaborate with others on these conversation papers, to plan out collectively what you would like us to talk about in seminar. Your actual papers, though, should never run more than two typed pages. The test of how effective they are will be the quality of the talk that they give rise to.

You will also be asked to revise some of the teaching materials you have been given to work with this term, and to draft your own GW course description. If we approve these materials, you will then be able to use them when you teach GW in the spring. And, finally, we will ask you to write two 6-8 page pieces that connect some of the readings you are doing for the seminar with your work as a teacher. At the end of the semester, you should turn in a folder that contains all of these writings along with any revisions you make to them. Like your GW students when they present their portfolios, you should also provide a short (2-3 page) introduction to the materials in your folder—a retrospective look at your work both in this seminar and in teaching composition. To sum up, then, your end-of-term folder must thus include at least:

Four conversation papers;
A GW course description & revised assignment;
Two 6-8 page pieces on teaching; and
A 2-3 page reflective introduction to the work in your folder.

You may revise any writing you do for this course as many times as you like, and we will always be happy to talk with you about your work.

Your final grade will be based both on the writings in your end-of-term folder and on the quality of your work throughout the semester. You will thus want to make sure that you come regularly to class, hand in your writings on time, and participate as fully as you can in our work together.

We will tell you immediately if we have any concerns about your standing in or work for this course. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask us.

Good luck. We are excited to have the chance to teach this course.

English 2510: Critical Statement

The defining aim of teaching composition at the University of Pittsburgh is to engage undergraduates in much the same sorts of work we ourselves are doing as intellectuals. This holds for all students in all courses, from the most basic to the most advanced. And it means not only that we ask students to begin as writers to form their own positions on complex texts and issues, but also that we encourage teachers to draw on their interests as writers and scholars in setting up the work of a course.

English 2510, the Seminar in Teaching Composition, is a course required of all beginning graduate teaching assistants at Pitt. It is co-taught by two members of the composition faculty on a rotating basis. The seminar aims to get students off to a good start in teaching college writing, and also to encourage them to reflect on the work they are doing in the classroom and on how that work might relate to their other intellectual projects and concerns.

Every student in 2510 also teaches a section of General Writing—a beginning course in composition taken by most Pitt undergraduates—in which they all work (at least for that first term) with the same series of readings and assignments. But that is about all they hold in common. Some are poets, journalists, or fiction writers who have come to study in our MFA program; others are MA or Ph.D. students in our program in Cultural and Critical Studies—which means that they may be doing work in literature, critical theory, film, or composition. Some have just earned their BAs; others are returning to the university after years spent in teaching, writing, or other work. They are, in short, a bright and diverse lot, who not only bring varying interests to the seminar but who move on from it to quite different kinds of work and study.

For these reasons we do not try in 2510 to introduce either a particular field of study or set of teaching practices. The seminar is not a course in theories of rhetoric or composition—though we read much of both. And it is not a training course in a specific method of teaching, even though much of our talk in it always has to do with what people are doing in their classrooms and why. Similarly, the teachers of 2510 do not observe or evaluate the work students are doing in their GW classrooms. This is done instead by a committee of other faculty members and advanced graduate students—a distribution of labor that frees the seminar leaders from having to explain or advocate a particular approach to teaching ("what you should be doing this week with assignment four," that sort of thing), and allows them instead to encourage students to discuss various issues in teaching without feeling pushed to defend or apologize for the various moves and mistakes they may have just made in their own classrooms.

We are thus able to center our work in 2510 on the question of how to talk about teaching in ways that might help students rethink and
improve it. One main goal of the seminar, then, is to help beginning teachers think of the classroom as a space that is neither completely free nor wholly determined. We want students, that is, to recognize some of the ways they have already been positioned as teachers and writers by the various discourses of the culture, university, profession, program, and so on. But we also want them to see that in responding to the demands of these discourses they can create in their work as teachers a sense of purpose that is their own.

We also look closely in seminar at some ways that other teachers and theorists have represented what they do in their classrooms. Readings here change from year to year, but in addition to those mentioned on the above syllabus they have in recent years included writers like Wayne Booth, Roger Sale, Robert Scholes, Stanley Fish, Ann Berthoff, William Coles, Linda Flower, Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield, and Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon. Our aim in reading such theorists is not primarily to pick up tips about teaching, or to speculate on what might or might not work in their approaches, but to ask what view of English, of reading and writing, each seems to speak in the name of. For instance, if someone like Wayne Booth seems to offer a different sense of the aims and methods of teaching English than does, say, Robert Scholes, then what are the principled reasons behind these differences? Who or what does Booth speak for that Scholes does not, and vice versa? And how do students then locate themselves as teachers in relation to the competing values and practices that these theorists stand for? What might the course in composition that TAs are now trying to teach be said to stand or speak for?

The conversation about teaching begun in 2510 continues on in many other ways beyond it. For instance, after their first year, most graduate students at Pitt go on to teach a diverse set of courses in literature and writing—all of which are taught by staffs of instructors who together determine the set of readings and assignments they will work with for a particular term, and who then meet regularly to discuss the progress of the course. Similarly, we no longer require students to sit for a set of comprehensive exams for the Ph.D., but instead ask them to define an issue or problem that somehow brings together several areas of study that interest them, and to write a 30-40 page paper that discusses the reading they do in those areas. Very often students use these projects to try to relate the work they are doing as teachers of undergraduates to the sorts of criticism and theory they are learning in their graduate seminars—and these issues often become part of their dissertations as well. A result is that graduate work in composition at Pitt often centers, not on the writing process or rhetoric of rhetoric but, on issues and problems that affect English teaching in general. To put it another way, “composition” becomes a kind of code word for a view of English Studies that puts the classroom at the center rather than the margins of its concerns.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Saint John's University
ENG 845: Approaches to the Teaching of Composition

Derek Owens

Syllabus

Objectives

This course has three objectives: 1) glimpsing the “centers” of the discipline (examining past and present theories of composition instruction); 2) looking at the “margins” of the discipline (investigating goings-on related to composition and rhetoric but seldom discussed within the field); and 3) making bridges (developing your intellectual desires and pedagogical goals within the context of composition studies). As we move through these realms of inquiry we'll appreciate the complexity of technical, social, and political debates that have shaped the field of composition studies. In the process we'll situate ourselves in relation to those debates as we develop pragmatic yet theoretically informed approaches to teaching writing. Finally we'll ask ourselves questions about the nature (and relevance) of teaching writing in a postmodern world where cultural and technological changes are causing terms like “literacy,” “discourse,” and “writing” to undergo constant revision.

Course Overview

Think of this course as divided into quarters. First we'll examine a sampling of different ways of teaching writing, from “classical” to “progressive” approaches. Then we'll turn our attention to the discipline itself, composition as a profession. After this we switch gears and get a taste of certain cross-cultural theories of discourse. Finally we'll tackle some exploratory approaches to writing not widely addressed in composition studies. As you move through these phases, looking at various high-profile debates and workings in the margins, keep asking yourself: what does this have to do with me as a teacher? what does it offer my students? what can I take from this material to further shape my own perspectives towards writing and teaching?

Assignments/Evaluation

Each week excerpts from a book on the required reading list will be discussed, with perhaps an additional essay. You'll turn in a written response to all required readings when they're assigned (min. 3 pp). In addition there will be three main assignments: 1) a journal review; 2) a review of works from the reserve reading; and 3) an investigative, exploratory essay. Assignments 1 and 2 will be collaborative efforts, with 2 to 3 people per group.

The journal review will entail getting familiar with a specific journal in the field (College Composition and Communication, College English, JAC: A