

Running Head: Preservice Secondary Language Arts Teaching Methods

Preservice Secondary Language Arts Teaching Methods

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The syllabus that I am including in this chapter is the most recent one I have used in the course known as “the methods course” in the secondary English Education program for preservice teachers at the University of Oklahoma. I have taught this class eight times in the last seven years, with revisions almost every time I have taught it. The iteration of the syllabus that I present here was written during a time of change, being developed during a major program revision, the publication of the NCTE/IRA standards and related books, the completion of a study I helped to do of preservice methods classes (Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995), and my own continuing efforts to provide a course that both builds on the prior classes and experiences in our departmental program and prepares preservice teachers for happy and successful early career experiences.

Before presenting the syllabus itself, I’d like to review what I feel are the most significant influences on my development of this syllabus (keeping in mind that in a few years it will probably look different): my own background, my methods class study, the programmatic context for the class, and the cultural context our teachers enter.

#### Personal Background

My own preservice training still strongly influences the way in which I teach the methods class. In 1976-7 I got my M.A.T. from the University of Chicago, studying under George Hillocks. George’s program focused on instructional principles that still form the core of my approach to teaching the methods class. In George’s methods class he impressed on us the importance of thinking of instruction in terms of thematically-organized units of 4-8 weeks. A thematic emphasis, he believed, provided coherence and purpose to instruction and also helped to lay schematic foundations through which students could develop scripts for learning how to read literature. As he stated in the textbook we used, The Dynamics of English Instruction, Grades 7-12 (Hillocks, McCabe, & McCampbell, 1971), “One of the most important things that any literature unit can do is to provide a conceptual matrix against which the student can examine each new work he reads. Insights into any given work are partly the result of experience in reading others because

concepts grow by comparison and contrast” (p. 254). Conceptual growth is at the heart of this approach, facilitated by teacher scaffolding, student activity, and collaborative learning projects. When I completed George’s program and began my first job, I was always surprised to hear that the other first-year teachers were staying up past midnight every night trying to figure out what to do the next day. My training in planning extended units always gave me a long-term plan that, while continually being adjusted, never left me wondering where to go or what to do next. Through the methods class I hope to provide the same conceptual and pedagogical tools I learned from George for the teachers I work with. I try to model these instructional principles through explicit attention to scaffolding, frequent group activities, and instruction designed to provide extended conceptual growth toward a specific end: the development of a thematic unit of instruction that is designed for use during student teaching.

#### Methods Class Study

A few years after I arrived at the University of Oklahoma I decided to get a better sense of how other people taught the methods class. The idea mushroomed and soon I solicited methods course syllabi from over 300 other universities, ultimately receiving over 80 to study along with Melissa Whiting, at the time a doctoral student and research assistant at OU. We learned quite a bit from seeing how other people organized the course (see Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995, for the complete study). We were somewhat disheartened to find that a number of people taught the class as a survey; that is, as a broad effort to cover a very wide range of teaching issues, inevitably covering each superficially and often assessing student through factual exams. What was especially ironic about such courses was that the textbooks that they used (and tested students on) typically argued against broad coverage of surface information and instead stressed conceptual development and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. Other course organizations, however, proved to be very informative. In classifying the syllabi we found, in addition to the survey, courses that we called workshops, experience-

based, theoretical, and reflective. My own course was primarily a workshop, one that set aside significant class time for students to do hands-on work applying concepts from the course readings. My methods class required students to develop a unit of instruction for its main project outside class (with the option of doing it in teams), and much of the in-class work was spent developing additional units under my supervision. The class itself therefore provided experiences of the type that they would go through in developing their own units, thus scaffolding their conceptual understanding of how to think in terms of units. Because the class involved a lot of collaboration and sharing, it also potentially provided each student with a number of units to take out into the field to make their first years of teaching less stressful.

When Melissa and I read the syllabi from the methods class study, we found new ways to make the workshop more effective. In particular, the experience-based courses provided an excellent approach that coincided with a programmatic development. Our program had previously required a minimum of 30 hours of field experiences for each of two departmental core courses. Following a program revision, in addition to these 60+ hours of field experiences, each methods class was required to be accompanied by 30-40 hours of field observations. The experience-based courses we identified in the study put preservice teachers out into the field for extensive observations, often requiring some sort of field log, case study, or teaching plans to be developed. I borrowed some ideas from these courses and, for the new field experience requirement in my methods class, gave the students a set of options that they could choose from for their field experience assessment. They could develop teaching plans, perhaps in conjunction with their supervising teacher. Or they could do some sort of study of the classroom through a reflective log, an analysis of the textbooks and how they were taught, a case study of a student or set of students, or other type of classroom analysis. Any of these options would help prepare them for the final requirements of their preservice program: their

student teaching and the complementary action research course taken during their ninth semester.

The theoretical and reflective influences also came into play, though less structurally. Following George's lead I always tried to provide a theoretical grounding for any teaching methods I presented, using various NCTE Theory and Research Into Practice (TRIP) books over the years (e.g., Kahn, Walters, & Johannessen, 1984) as well as textbooks that had a clear theoretical foundation. The reflective syllabi that we studied made personal reflection the central activity of the class, requiring literacy autobiographies, analyses of personal learning styles, etc., as the primary means of assessment. With all of the other course demands, I could not include these assignments in the methods class, although some of the observation logs end up being personally reflective. Instead, I began requiring literacy autobiographies in one of the courses they took during their junior years, the course in the teaching of grammar. Our study of methods classes, then, had a great effect on my methods class syllabus.

#### Programmatic Context

The program revision made the methods course the official capstone course of the preservice English Education program, taken during the final semester of the senior year. Ideally, the prior coursework would provide a strong foundation for the content area methods classes. The departmental curriculum requires courses in school and culture, computer/media, adolescent psychology, and instructional technology. English Education students, in addition to these departmental courses, begin their program through a course in the teaching of grammar. This class provides background in cultural issues of language development, engagement in a discussion of the politics of standard language, and initial instruction in the development of lesson plans related to language usage. The course also includes a mentoring component in which the students join a student affiliate of NCTE, subscribe to a professional electronic listserve discussion, and become acquainted with professional issues through guest appearances by local teachers.

From this course the students move as a cohort through a class in basic issues in literacy, a class in the teaching of adolescent literature, and then to the methods class, which itself serves as the final preparation for student teaching and the accompanying action research class (both taken for graduate credit).

The movement toward the cohort group and student affiliate are designed to give students a sense of community and continuity that has been missing in the past. Previously, two students could conceivably go through the program at the same time, never meet, and have different professors for key courses. Our goal with the new program is that when they come to the methods class the students will have a common language, similar conceptual understandings, and a cohesion and camaraderie that helps give them a distinct identity as students in our program. Overall, we hope for the program as a whole to provide rigorous instruction and experiences in the discipline that lead to the shared ordeal that Lortie (1975) argues provides a professional identity for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals but is lacking among teachers.

#### Cultural Context

One final consideration in the development of the methods class is attention to the cultural context of teaching. Many of our students leave the university and go out to teach in small, conservative communities. One of our graduates lost her job because during her first year, at a time that American troops were building their forces in Kuwait prior to the Gulf War, she refused to put her hand over her heart during the daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. In the academy we can easily become insulated from the values of many of the communities that we send our graduates out to teach in; university professors are rarely natives of the areas in which they teach and often espouse a more liberal and relatively radical philosophy than would sit well with local residents. Our program stresses student-, response-, and activity-oriented methods and inclusive attitudes towards diverse students. Yet our students often find when they interview that

local school administrators take a dim view of our progressive ideals, believing that real education begins through experience in the real world of schools.

The methods course is attentive to the situations that students will find themselves in and urges students to contextualize their instruction so that it approximates the instruction that they might ultimately provide. For instance, several earnest, high-minded methods class students were designing instruction centered on the theme of war and peace, with their literary selections all having an anti-military theme. We discussed what would happen if they taught this unit in the community where the teacher lost her job during the Gulf War, a community that included a great number of proud and patriotic military veterans who were highly respected citizens due to their honorable service to their country. The discussion helped the students see the political stance behind their literary selections and the disrespect it would show to the parents, siblings, and other relatives of many of their students. Adjusting instructional decisions to specific school settings is a critical lesson learned in the course.

### The Syllabus

Following is the syllabus I used in the spring, 1997 methods class, taking into account these various influences. One thing I should point out is that I use several texts that I have written. Using my own books has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the students get a pretty clear idea of how I see things and so there's little ambiguity about the values behind my classes. I also write my practice-oriented pieces so that they'll work well in methods classes, and so they tend to match my own approach to the course pretty well. On the down side, students are reluctant to be critical of my books when we discuss them, so the discussions probably lack the edge they might have in someone else's class. I'm not sure where the best solution to this problem lies.

For this course I start out with two books from the NCTE Standards in Practice series, one for middle school and one for high school. These books acquaint students with the issue of standards, illustrate the distinction between the middle school and high school

models of curriculum and faculty structure, illustrate how teachers adapt to local contingencies, and provide an abundance of practical teaching ideas. The Beach and Marshall book serves as the source for designing thematic units of instruction and occupies several weeks of the course. Other books then deal with issues of multiple intelligences, classroom discourse, and vocabulary instruction, all of which fit within the thematic units that the students design. As noted, the class is taught so as to model the instruction that it advocates, and for the most part students say that it works in that regard.



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ENGLISH EDUCATION CAPSTONE COURSE

Tuesday, 4:25-7:05, Gittinger Hall, Room 326

TEXTS

Beach, R., & Marshall, J. (1991). Teaching literature in the secondary school. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Marshall, J. D., Smagorinsky, P., & Smith, M. W. (1995). The language of interpretation: Patterns of discourse in discussions of literature. NCTE Research Report No. 27. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Nagy, W. E. (1988). Teaching vocabulary to improve reading comprehension. Urbana, IL, and Newark, DE: National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association.

Smagorinsky, P. (1991). Expressions: Multiple intelligences in the English class. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Smagorinsky, P. (1996). Standards in practice, grades 9-12. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Wilhelm, J. (1996). Standards in practice, grades 6-8. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

[See web site for Course Description]

COURSE PROJECTS

You are responsible for completing one project (with the option of a second) from the coursework and readings, and one from your field experience. Following are descriptions of each project.

COURSEWORK/READINGS

Project 1A:

Either individually or in collaboration with one other student, you will prepare a teaching unit encompassing about 6-8 weeks to be used in student teaching. The unit will organize literature around some specific theme or principle and be derived from theories of learning and teaching. The unit will include:

1. Rationale
2. Objectives/Competencies/Outcomes
3. Materials
4. Specific lessons and activities
5. Means of evaluation through several types of intelligence

The unit should allow for a variety of means of expression, including writing, and other activities such as oral work, art, dance, film-making, and whatever else you feel will promote understanding. The lessons in the unit should enable students to learn to construct meaning in subsequent independent undertakings.

The development of this unit will parallel the issues explored as the course progresses.

Project 1B:

This class is designed as a workshop to teach you how to satisfy Project 1A's requirements. The class sessions themselves will engage you regularly with a group of 3-4 students of fixed membership. (You will select your own group mates.) With this group you will develop a unit of instruction meeting the same requirements as those of the unit you design for Objective 1A. The unit you develop in class will be different, however, in that its primary intent is to provide you a supportive environment in which to

learn how to plan instruction under risk-conducive conditions. [See website for details on this option.]

## FIELD EXPERIENCE

You may do one of the following projects to synthesize what you learn during your field experience. [Note: complete versions of each project are available on the website.]

1. Keep a log of your impressions during your field experience. This log should be a serious, detailed effort to relate what you observe in the school classroom to what you learn about teaching through the course readings and class discussions.
2. Conduct a focused study of one student, or a small set of students in the class you observe.
3. If you are observing more than one teacher--or if you are observing one teacher teaching two very different types of classes--write an analysis of the two types of teaching you observe.
4. Contrast the teaching and learning you observe in the classroom with the teaching and learning you have observed in another setting, such as a sport, an extracurricular activity, a university class, an out-of-school setting such as church or work, or other learning environment.
4. Conduct a rigorous critique of the teaching materials used by the teacher.
5. Other project of your choice, with my approval.

[See web site for the class schedule and other details of the syllabus.]

## References

Hillocks, G., McCabe, B. J., & McCampbell, J. F. (1971). The dynamics of English instruction, grades 7-11. New York: Random House.

Kahn, E., Walters, C., & Johannessen, L. (1984). Writing about literature. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Lortie, D. C. (1975). Schoolteacher: A sociological study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smagorinsky, P., & Whiting, M. E. (1995). How English teachers get taught: Methods of teaching the methods class. Urbana, IL: Conference on English Education and National Council of Teachers of English.