Preparing Faculty to Teach Integrated Reading and Writing Courses

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Course Guidelines:
Five Guiding Principles for Integrated Reading and Writing

Below are the guiding principles that Austin Community College faculty have developed for teaching Integrated Reading and Writing. Our training modules provide lessons for these principles to help instructors learn how to apply them into their own curriculum.

1. **College-level material that is primarily informational, whole, and authentic**—whole books, contemporary articles or literary non-fiction as opposed to excerpts, paragraphs, and sentences.

   **Rationale:**
   To be ready for college-level courses, developmental students need practice and guidance in the same things that these courses require. The best way to prepare them is to assign college-level tasks, with assignments based on the same primarily informational reading they will encounter as they progress through their college courses, but with an understanding that the students need more guidance and in-class support than better-prepared students. Using challenging reading material with instructional support may accelerate student progress to college-level reading and writing.

2. **A thematic approach with an emphasis on critical thinking skills**—a variety of different sources to explore a theme with an emphasis on open-ended problems, as opposed to emphasis on academic form, process, and correct answers.

   **Rationale:**
   A thematic approach fosters connections among readings, helping students develop rich, well-informed content for students’ writing, rather than focusing primarily on correct form. To prepare students for college, careers, and the world, they should be asked to wrestle with open-ended problems and use resources from the class to reach and defend their own conclusions. Students will develop a sense of their own ability to evaluate information and see themselves as able to weigh in on important topics. This approach facilitates opportunities for critical thinking, and making connections to the students’ own lives.

3. **Frequent low-stakes assignments culminating in a high-stakes assignment**—several assignments that are not assessed at all or at least graded on effort that lead to a more formal assignment, usually an essay, as opposed to assignments that emphasize correctness. It is our philosophy to avoid addressing skills in isolation that do not directly lead to a finished product.
Rationale:
Frequent low-stakes assignments can help build fluency and confidence for struggling students. Low-stakes assignments offer the freedom to explore ideas without the fear of negative consequences such as low grades. When underprepared students do challenging, college-level work, they need a lot of opportunities for practice. They need time to work through their thinking, try out new vocabulary, see how other students approach tasks, and receive targeted guidance from the teacher. Low-stakes, in-class activities help students develop the ideas, mastery, and confidence to be successful in later, graded assessments.

4. **Just-in-time instruction determined by ongoing assessment of needs**—support and guidance only in the service of completing assignments or when the teacher determines it is needed as evidenced by daily assessment, as opposed to front loading by separating and teaching discrete sub-skills in advance.

Rationale:
Students tend to cluster errors and these patterns of mistakes vary from one student to the next. A quick assessment can be used to gauge students’ comprehension of reading material and intervene if necessary. Student progress may be accelerated when taught only the skills they need. Students become more independent learners as they begin to use metacognition to correct their own mistakes. By decreasing the time spent on lectures and exercises, just-in-time instruction allows more class time for student-centered activities (working on assignments and projects) and student collaboration with the focus on ideas and critical thinking.

5. **Portfolio of student work as a final assessment**—students and teacher determine a well-chosen collection of student assignments to showcase students’ actual progress throughout the semester as opposed to a final test or single final project.

Rationale:
Portfolios support a growth mind-set by emphasizing a student’s progress rather than the average of his class grades. Rather than showing where students are at the moment in time when they are taking a test, grades are determined by the scope of a student’s work. This also prevents early struggles with coursework from causing a low final grade. Portfolio grading rubrics are shared with students at the beginning of the semester, allowing students to self-monitor their own progress and take ownership of their learning experience. A portfolio includes some specific assignments required by the teacher, but also leaves room for students to evaluate their own body of work and select other assignments to include. Since research suggests that metacognitive activities enhance student learning, a written self-reflection is included and frames the discussion at the final student conference with the instructor. Teachers may get together to grade portfolios collaboratively to lessen the subjectivity of grading a portfolio and to discuss ways to improve teaching and learning.

*Integrated Reading and Writing Committee, Austin Community College, 2016.*
A Thematic Approach

Why Themes?

- When students learn material organized thematically, they can more easily develop schema and topic-related vocabulary.
- When students learn material organized thematically, they can more easily bridge understanding of readings of several texts and transfer reading and writing skills to the next selection, project, or assignment.
- When students learn material organized thematically, they can add new "loops" of meaning with each reading rather like the structure of loops that make up a DNA molecule (Stahl, 2013).

Big Questions

Organizing the curriculum around themes based on “Big Questions or Ideas” enables instructors to

- demonstrate the nature of learning through interdisciplinary means,
- increase student interest and engagement,
- expand strategies for assessment, and
- utilize both collaborative and cooperative learning.

Through the use of themes, students are better able to connect the curriculum to their own lives and establish relevancy and transference of knowledge. Planning a thematic unit will require a substantial amount of initial design work, but it is a powerful method and can lead to deep, rather than surface, understanding.

Building a Scaffold

For semester-long planning, all assignments are related to the theme or themes of the unit and are arranged in a scaffold. Preliminary assignments provide students with background knowledge. Later assignments require increasingly complex levels of understanding.

Sample Assignment Arc

- Low-stakes assignment #1
  Identifying literary and social themes
- Class discussion on literary and social themes
- Low-stakes assignment #2
- Multimedia project (i.e. Power Point, podcast, video, social media or website page, Tumblr)
- Low-stakes assignment #3
- Practice essay/short answer
  Scaffolding Assignment #1
- Rough draft writing assignment
  Scaffolding Assignment #2
- Critical responses to shorter readings or articles
  High-Stakes Assignments 1, 2, and 3
- Three 5-page papers (research, reflection, comparison/contrast, argument, persuasive)
  The type, length, and grade weight of each high-stakes assignment will vary depending on the low-stakes and scaffolding assignments and the objective of the activity.

*C. Brewer M.Ed., Austin Community College, 2016.*
Planning for Thematic Units

1. Theme Selection
   - Discipline 1
   - Discipline 2
   - Discipline 3

2. Reading Selections
   - Novel or Short Story that discusses theme:
   - Psychology Article addressing theme:
   - Science of phenomenon or event:
   - History of the phenomenon or event:

3. Backwards Planning
   - 1. High Stakes Assignment
   - 2. Scaffolding Assignment
   - 3. Low Stakes Assignment

4. Semester-long Planning
   - High Stakes Assignment #2
   - High Stakes Assignment #1
   - Theme
   - High Stakes Assignment #3

Source: Hillary Procknow, PhD | hillary.procknow@austin.utexas.edu
**Integrated Reading and Writing Training Module Sample Content**

**A Thematic Approach**

**Discussion # 1**

How does the thematic approach affect student engagement and student learning? Give specific examples from your own experience as a teacher or discuss your observations of other classrooms.

Think about a class activity that you feel had a high engagement rate for students. Consider the role of a thematic curriculum when answering questions such as the following:

- What classroom topics or activities led to students being interested and engaged in the classroom activities?
- What kinds of behaviors did you observe?
- What was the effect of student engagement on overall student achievement or retention?
- What feedback did students give for classroom activities with which they were intellectually engaged?

Create a detailed, academic response in 250 words or more. Please Note: You must select "Create Thread" for the discussion prompt to appear.

**Discussion # 2**

Discuss how you would use themes in your classroom. Choose two or three themes that you think would appeal to your students. You can select themes that are listed in this unit or think of something else you would like to try.

For each theme, do the following:
- Describe why you expect the use of each theme to increase student engagement.
- Describe ways you could incorporate each theme into your curriculum. Give specific examples of texts, activities, and assignments (high-stakes and low-stakes).
- What are some of the instructional objectives and affective goals that might be met within each theme?

Create a detailed, academic response in 250 words or more. Please Note: You must select "Create Thread" for the discussion prompt to appear.

_C. Brewer M. Ed., Austin Community College, 2016._
Integrated Reading and Writing Training Modules Sample Content

The Themed Curriculum Arc Project

Description

A Themed Curriculum Arc is a set of lesson plans that develops one theme through a series of low-stakes assignments culminating in at least one high-stakes assignment. A typical themed curriculum arc would last at least 3 weeks and focus on a subset of the class objectives. It would fit into the overall curriculum among approximately two to five other themed curriculum arcs in the semester. The arc might begin with low-stakes assignments where students determine main ideas from their reading selections for study purposes and create thesis statements for their own writing. The arc might culminate in a test over their theme-related informational texts and/or an academic essay informed by their texts and focusing on a theme-related topic.

Culminating Assignment

As part of your training, your culminating assignment will be to plan a themed curriculum arc for your own class, a set of lesson plans with daily class schedule. As you are learning about the five principles, keep your final project in mind, and plan it as you go through the training. You may use the template that is provided to guide your project, or you can work with another form of organization that you prefer. Be sure to include and identify all the requested components in your final themed curriculum arc. We hope this will be a creative and challenging assignment that will help you feel well prepared to teach your integrated reading and writing course.

Directions

1. Create a day-to-day schedule of a themed curriculum arc lasting 5 to 7 class meetings. Describe the theme, reading materials, objectives/outcomes, class activities, homework assignments, and grading policy for a block of your curriculum that culminates in at least one major assignment. The plan should show how you incorporate the five principles in your curriculum.
2. Use the template attached at the end of this page to complete the curriculum arc assignment.
3. The Five Principles
   - **Informational Texts** – List the texts and reading selections you will use. Tell why you chose the texts and selections you did.
   - **Themes** – List your theme and describe why you chose it. What subtopics can be included in the theme you chose?
   - **Low-Stakes Assignments** – Describe the assignments your students will do in preparation for the culminating major assignment(s). Tell what the purpose is for each of the low-stakes assignments. Tell your criteria for grading your low-stakes and high-stakes assignments.
   - **Just-in-Time Instruction** – Describe how and when you will assess your students’ abilities during class. Tell how and when do you plan to address any students’ deficiencies?
   - **Portfolios** – Tell which of the assignments will be included in students’ final assessment portfolios. Explain how you determined what would be included and how you will use it as assessment.

INRW Committee, Austin Community College, 2016.