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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Designing a High School or Middle School Course (or Unit) in Professional Writing

Jonathan Bush
Western Michigan University

Leah A. Zuidema
Dordt College, leah.zuidema@dordt.edu

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Abstract

The article offers information on the development of professional writing course in English middle school or high school classroom. It mentions that a good syllabus not only provide answers to basic questions, but also to questions that Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins have pertained to as the essential questions. It notes that students learn from writing activities and assessments including how to write in genres, evaluate the settings of professional tools, and manage their writing processes.

Keywords

English language, high school students, middle school students, writing processes, composition, curriculum planning

Disciplines

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Comments

Jonathan Bush and Leah Zuidema, Editors

Professional Writing in the English Classroom

Designing a High School or Middle School Course (or Unit) in Professional Writing

Since we began this column, we have had many interactions with English language arts teachers who teach issues related to professional writing in their English classrooms—sixth grade through twelfth; developmental through advanced and AP; rural, suburban, and urban. We've found that teachers are doing so many of the things we advocate—writing for real audiences, purposes, and in real genres; engaging in real-world writing tasks with stakeholders, results, and (sometimes) failures. We have also seen teachers integrating professional writing into literature study, cultural discussions, and local advocacy in their classrooms. We have learned from teachers who use visual design and visual rhetoric, who create projects that engage in usability, and who engage students in widely varying writing to solve problems, build relationships, and create desired outcomes. We have also seen that professional writing concepts tie in closely to best practices in teaching writing and are well-supported by the nascent Common Core State Standards.

What we rarely see, and haven't had a chance to discuss here, is a truly specialized professional writing course at the middle school or high school level. We'd like to take this final column to muse about what such a class might look like. While we focus here on the particulars of course design, we suspect that some readers may wish to try a unit within a course instead. The principles that we suggest for course design can also be adapted for the design of a unit within a course with a broader focus. Below, we walk through some of the key considerations that we find useful for building or revamping the curriculum for a professional writing course. Although most middle school and high school teachers don't prepare a syllabus for their courses, we use the frame of a syllabus in this column as a way to discuss the features of the course we're suggesting.

Identify Essential Questions

The course syllabus captures in one place the goals and plans for curriculum and instruction. The syllabus provides answers to the basic *who, what, when, where, why, how* questions about the course. But in our experience, a good syllabus not only provides answers, it also identifies some very important questions—what Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe have referred to as the "essential questions" that drive a course. (Although Wiggins is perhaps best known for his work on curricular design, he is also well-versed in planning for instruction in professional writing. His May 2009 *EJ* article, "Real-World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter," is one of our go-to texts for introducing teachers to practical principles for professional writing.)

How can we identify the essential questions for a course in professional writing? Wiggins and McTighe posit that essential questions "are not answerable with finality in a brief sentence . . . . Their aim is to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry, and to spark more questions—including thoughtful student questions—not just pat answers" (106). They further explain that essential questions are broad, recurring, and timeless; they elicit inquiry into key issues and ongoing puzzles within a discipline; they bring to life the relevance of class explorations, and they engage the diverse learners in the class (108–09).

What, then, might be some of the essential questions for a professional writing course?

The questions that we gravitate toward tend to be more variations of essential questions that guide our planning for other writing courses, such as academic or creative writing classes. Thus, we tweak a "generic" question such as *What makes writing good?* so that it is more specific: *What makes professional writing good?* For a college course in professional writing, Leah uses the following essential questions:

- What is professional writing? What processes and strategies do experienced writers use to compose in professional genres? How do they learn to write in new genres and for new audiences, purposes, and situations?

- What kinds of writing do people do in your profession? Why? How?

- How do technologies shape writing practices? How can writers use technologies well?

- When is professional writing "good," and how do we know? Who decides?

- How are ethical and biblical perspectives related to professional writing? What can/ should we do with or through our writing? And how can/ should we respond to others' writing?

As you can see, these questions allude to big ideas in professional writing. As Leah notes in her syllabus, the questions are "deceptively simple"; they point to the key ideas and ongoing questions that keep expert practitioners and theorists in the field very busy every day! Notice, too, that the scope here is quite broad, but the questions could be explored by beginners in the field (including high school students). Additionally, the questions are shaped for Leah's particular teaching context. As a professor at a Christian college, her curriculum reflects her school's mission by asking students to explore connections between biblical perspectives and the work of professional writers. While this focus may not fit your teaching context, it does illustrate how teachers can identify essential questions that bring together disciplinary inquiry **and** the unique needs and interests of their students.

Design Learning Activities and Assessments

The essential questions aren't just a list that is conveniently captured in the syllabus. Rather, they drive the design of the rest of the course. They help us to identify the skills, strategies, practices, ideas, and resources that our students need to know and use, and they guide us in shaping the learning activities and assessments that will allow teachers and students to explore together. Notice where we start: not by "checking the textbook" to let it tell us what to study and when. Textbook authors don't write curriculum. Teachers write curriculum: we—not textbook authors—take primary responsibility for understanding and meeting the unique learning needs of our students. We use textbooks to support the learning activities that we plan. We as teachers are in the driver's seat, using essential questions to identify course goals that become the basis for shaping significant learning experiences for our students.

In both of our classes, we seek to include a range of significant learning experiences that help students to learn, explore, practice, apply, and evaluate key concepts—while also reflecting on and naming the connections between what they are doing and what they've learned from class discussions, lectures, and readings. For this reason, our courses typically are built around problem-based scenarios, in which students (or student groups) are placed in a professional/organizational situation in which writing must be used to address a particular issue. The students must analyze the situation, find the best course of action for the organization, and use writing to address the issue and/or justify their actions to a particular audience. The major projects for our courses are problem based, and they are sequenced so that students are prompted to keep deepening their exploration of the essential questions and building on what they have learned in very practical ways.

For example, in Jonathan's professional writing course, the major projects are focused directly on using writing as a means of problem-solving. In addition to teaching the conventions of various genres of writing such as memos, proposals, and technical reports, he and other teachers in professional writing courses often use scenarios as opportunities for students to analyze a professional task and then engage with the writing required for it. Some projects include the following:

- **Professional Scenarios:** When given a particular scenario within a profession, students

need to analyze the scenario and, using written communication, react effectively. This typically involves key communications to various audiences. One scenario involves an organization's inadvertent use of imagery perceived as racist in an online database (the database's search function for a particular ethnic term brings results with images that can be viewed as stereotypical). Using supplied and implied context, the student (or student team) must decide the best courses of internal and external action. Students tend to produce informative and persuasive internal memos and reports and proposals for action along with drafts of potential external written documents developed for key affected users/customers.

- **Résumé/Cover-Letter Development:** Following the problem-based concept, rather than having students create a generic résumé, they are tasked with tailoring their current résumés to a specific position within their fields that, while appropriate, is slightly aspirational/beyond their current level of education and experience. Students learn to rhetorically highlight key features of importance and revise their work strategically in response to the needs of the position.

- **Client-Based Projects**: This culminating project involves student teams building a relationship and working with a real-world client to solve some issue within the organization that involves written communication. Much like the work students do in scenario projects, students are confronted with a situation and use writing to communicate internally to develop courses of action. Typical products include memos, research reports, proposals, and, if appropriate, drafts of external documents for use. Recent client projects have typically included local nonprofits but also have assisted community-enhancing organizations such as the local community ski hill and a lower-level minor league baseball team.

In Leah's course (http://homepages.dordt.edu/~lzuidema/eng305.htm), the major projects are also problem-based. She describes the projects in her syllabus with the following notes to students:

1. **Web Profile:** Compose a profile of a notable Dordt College student or alum. Selected profiles will be used by our Advancement office for promotional purposes and will be posted to the college website.

2. **Fact Sheet:** Research a genre of writing unique to a profession that interests you. Report your findings in a two-sided, visually appealing fact sheet for undergraduates in your major.

3. **Needs Assessment Report:** Research and report to me (as your project supervisor) on a potential client's documentation needs.

4. **Proposal with Presentation:** Propose a plan for meeting the client's documentation needs. Write a proposal for your prospective team; pitch your plan with a PowerPoint presentation.

5. **Documentation with Report:** Collaborate with classmates to implement your team's documentation plan. Together, compose a formal report that gives a written analysis and evaluation of your team's process and final product.

While the projects in both of our classes stretch out over multiple weeks, we also include problem-based writing activities that are more compact. We find this to be an important balance. While the major projects are opportunities for students to practice a variety of skills in more complex scenarios, the "little" assignments allow us to concentrate our teaching on a smaller set of skills, strategies, practices, ideas, and resources. Limiting the focus in this way allows students to get immediate practice—and prompt feedback to inform their learning. The students learn a great deal through these activities and assessments, including how to

- analyze and write in genres and for situations that are new to them but common in professional writing contexts;

- achieve their own purposes while also meeting the needs and expectations of their audiences;

- apply principles for visual design and usability;

- work effectively when writing for others (clients) and with others (collaborators);

- evaluate, apply, and override the constraining default settings of professional tools (including software and online applications for word process-

ing, presentations, Web design, research databases, and social media);

- consider the ethical implications of everyday writing decisions; and

- manage their writing processes with skill and strategy.

Our students write for and during every class period, in genres including résumés and other application materials, emails, memos, letters, instructions, descriptions, proposals, presentations, meeting minutes, informal and formal reports, webpages, and social media posts.

And yes, we believe that it's important that students read about professional writing, too. (We aren't averse to textbooks; we simply want to ensure that they serve the proper place in the classroom rather than dictating the curriculum.) Textbook chapters and how-to articles from professional publications provide students with useful examples and advice. To find these resources, we visit publisher websites (requesting complimentary exam copies when we see possible textbooks for our classes) and search scholarly databases. Additionally, in our work with both high school and college classes, we have also had success with charging students to gather examples of the genres that we are studying.

What about tests and exams? Daily assignments and major

projects are key to our assessment of student learning in a writing course, but more traditional assessments can also have a place. These assessments can be used as an opportunity for students to analyze their own learning and set goals for their continued writing work. For example, the basic structure and description for the exam in Leah's writing classes is one that she has used with both high school and college students. Students use the final weeks of class to build a Web portfolio that showcases polished selections from the documents that they have completed for the course. Some of the essay exam questions ask students to respond directly to selected essential questions from the syllabus; others prompt them to discuss their strengths, development, and areas for growth as a professional writer. For all of the essays, students are required to cite textual evidence from course readings and examples from activities as well as from their own writing.

As with any course, the plans for a professional writing class are always a work in progress. We make adjustments as we go, and keep notes that help us to revise when we repeat the course. We suspect that you may follow a similar process, and we are eager to hear about your plans for courses and units in professional writing.

Continuing the Conversation about Professional Writing

As this is our final column, we'd like to point out that it has been a privilege to contribute to *English Journal* via this column, and that we have been thrilled with the response we've received from teachers. We have been particularly pleased to learn from teachers who believe in the core ideas of professional writing—real audiences, real purposes, real genres—and who have integrated these ideas into their existing curriculum. As we embark on the age of the Common Core State Standards, and we, along with our colleagues at all levels, learn to negotiate with all standards—local, state, and national—we hope that the conversation about professional writing, both in the English language arts classroom and in our colleagues' subject areas, is able to continue. We encourage you to add your voice to the conversation by sharing what you are learning about teaching professional writing, and we look forward to reading your contributions in future issues of *English Journal.* Write on! 🅔🅙

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Leah Zuidema first taught professional writing to ninth through twelfth graders in her high school English classes. She is now associate professor of English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, where she teaches courses in English education and professional writing. Email her at lzuidema@dordt.edu. **Jonathan Bush** teaches English education and rhetoric/writing studies at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, where he also serves as department chair and director of the Third Coast Writing Project. His email is jonathan.bush@wmich.edu.