Introduction to the Curriculum Guide

Intended Audience

This curriculum guide is intended for English faculty at the community college or high school levels who want to use anti-racist, anti-sexist curricula that include a class analysis of society. Furthermore, it is intended for teachers who want to base their curriculum on literature rather than a textbook. It contains four complete curricula, each one centered on a carefully chosen novel or autobiography. Each one includes a summary of the text; what it offers students; issues and topics that could be explored in class using this text; ideas for introducing it; vocabulary lists; quizzes, discussion questions, and group work by chapter; supplementary texts, mainly expository with classwork and teaching ideas; writing and research assignments. Also included in the curriculum guide are three essays that describe how I teach academic writing, abstract reasoning and critical thinking, and how I utilize the social dimension of classroom life.

The classroom is a powerful environment where many lives are influenced; therefore, all serious teachers come to the realization that they must develop their own philosophy and personalized style of teaching. A collaborative approach, however, helps us grow professionally more than we ever could just by drawing on the lessons of our own practice. At different stages in one's career, it is extremely helpful to incorporate the work of more experienced others.

Why use a piece of literature as the core text in a Developmental English class?

A significant percentage of our students have never read a whole book, and certainly, the vast majority have never developed the habit of reading. Lacking fluency, many are intimidated by multi-syllabic words, complex sentences, and descriptive passages. Since they have been shaped by the influence of television and computers, they are ignorant of the intellectual benefits that reading offers. If our students are to become fluent and effective readers, these barriers must be broken. Without a doubt, this is one of the most profound challenges that we face as community college or High School English teachers.

Literature, with its unique qualities, is a vital tool for penetrating our students' reluctance to reading. Readers of literature identify with characters whose realities and experiences are very different from their own, growing the breadth and depth of their consciousness. By eliciting an emotional response, literature can connect students to the human experience, lending perspective on their own lives, aiding maturation, and motivating them to take their intellectual development seriously. Furthermore, completing a whole text can be enormously satisfying and empowering to a student who has never done so. This simple achievement can build a student's confidence and commitment to his or her growth and development.

In addition to providing a meaningful language experience for entering students, Developmental English must also prepare them for College English and other college level courses. Reading expository texts and developing research skills are a must!

But, very often these are also the hurdles that convince students that they are not "college material". Therefore, integrating these more intellectually challenging aspects of a developmental English course in an engaging and meaningful way helps students successfully negotiate these obstacles.

The Rationale for the Other Components of the Course

Introducing the novel

Since the entire course is built around one novel or autobiography, every effort must be made to motivate and capture the interest of the students before reading begins. A time line of the period, a discussion of key themes, reading about the author are all possibilities. Reading at least the first chapter aloud to the class will help the more reluctant readers become engaged, and it provides the instructor an opportunity to model close, active reading.

Vocabulary Study

Students know that expanding their vocabulary is important, but it's difficult to do it randomly. With more than half a million words in the largest English dictionaries, how does a serious student choose the words to learn? When teachers choose vocabulary words arbitrarily, there is no meaningful context for students to learn them. When new vocabulary words are related to a meaningful context, it becomes easier and more motivating for students to learn them. Ask students to come up with a working definition (by referring to its use in the text as well as the dictionary) of 10 – 15 words from each reading assignment and use the words in sentences. Introduce students to word structure when discussing these words in class.

In each chapter choose 10 – 15 words. Ask students to come up with a working definition (by referring to its use in the text as well as the dictionary) and write the word in the sentence. Introduce students to word structure when discussing these words in class.

Reading Aloud

Instructors should read aloud, particularly at the beginning of the book. Students who have a difficult time getting engaged in reading will find this extremely helpful. Many language skills are subconsciously absorbed when students listen to texts read well. Asking for student volunteers to read important passages and dramatize dialogue gives students the opportunity to practice reading aloud.

Quizzes on the Reading

In spite of their best intentions, students often skip the reading entirely or take a pragmatic skimming approach to completing the assignment. Giving regular recall quizzes is one way to motivate them to read the book. It has been my experience that students appreciate this coercive aspect of classroom work. Otherwise, too many fall behind on the reading and become demoralized with the class.

Responding to the Reading

Each week, for homework, students need to respond to questions about the assigned chapter in the novel in a low-stakes writing assignment. Thus, students are given the opportunity to reflect on the text and practice written expression. Now, since on-line platforms are available, I require students to post weekly responses to the text and then respond to other students' posts (an on-line conversation about the book). (Posting responses and weekly quizzes are the two assignments that cannot be made up.)

Group Discussions

Students benefit from discussing key passages or controversial issues related to the text in groups that are facilitated by fellow students. This gives shy students the chance to speak up in a setting that is less intimidating than speaking before the whole class.

Incorporate Supplementary Readings

An excellent way to make expository texts, poetry, newpaper articles, primary sources, etc. more accessible to students is to relate them to key issues and themes of a novel.

Multi-media

Show films (feature and documentary) that deepen students' appreciation of the novel and/or provide the opportunity for comparison. Bringing other relevant non-print artifacts, like songs and images, into the classroom will capture student attention and tap various students' strengths and interests.

Writing Assignments/Research Projects

Develop writing assignments that help students bridge the gap between personal and academic writing. As much as possible, develop topics that draw from the characters, plot, and themes of the novel. Require drafts.

What is not included in this Curriculum Guide

Lately, I have been using *Making Reading Relevant*, a small textbook for teaching specific reading skills as well as handouts (a large section from *The Least You Need to Know About English*) to teach what I feel are the most important grammar skills (mainly sentence structure).

How I arrived at my approach toward teaching

When I was in college, I made a decision to cut my hair short. Ever since the first year of high school, I'd worn my thick brown hair streaming down my back. Now, I was going to take on a whole different look. Normally a mundane decision, not even worth mentioning forty-five years later, it was accompanied, in this case, by an insight that embodies my evolution into political consciousness.

At first, I experienced it as a personal decision. Indeed, what could be more personal than cutting one's hair? But, suddenly this small decision triggered a shift in my inner world. (And isn't this the way all change occurs—a myriad of small quantitative changes resulting in a qualitative transformation?) I realized that this decision was not JUST personal AT ALL. I realized that more complex factors outside of myself and below the level of thought were influencing me to want to cut my hair short. "It is the woman's movement," I realized, "a social movement sweeping across the country has become an intimate part of me!" Fortunately, I had enough confidence in myself to not judge or second guess this conclusion as indicative of a weak mind, of someone who couldn't think for herself. I embraced it as a challenge, as a manifestation of personal growth. I embraced it with a vague and general sense that I was about to embark on an exciting journey into a meaningful adult life.

Like a sand storm, the 1970's woman's movement whipped its way into every aspect of social life, especially into the consciousness of young women like myself, just coming of age. It was causing women and men to rethink their choice of words, styles of dress, sexual behavior, career goals, views of history and literature, just… everything. It was no less formative than the anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements of that time were, as well, on me and my generation.

Now, I can look back and see that this small decision to project a new style of womanhood embodied a political way of viewing my identity. It was a shift in consciousness, where I no longer felt that my psyche was an island unto itself. It was no less significant than grasping the reality of the ocean by diving to its depths rather than comfortably viewing it from the shore. It was a welcome departure from the superficiality that my schooling and popular culture offered. And, because I came to it entirely on my own, I remember it to this day.

What was it that encouraged me to develop into a "political animal"? What were the factors in my life that fostered political consciousness—an awareness that what I knew, how I identified myself, and how I felt about myself were all interrelated with the social world in which I lived? Well… it was many complex factors, not the least of which was the social upheaval occurring on every continent around the world. But, one thing that did not contribute to this development, was my schooling. My schooling had not encouraged a critical view of society or a self-conscious view of myself in society.

Years later, as I began to define the kind of teacher I would be, I came to realize that education cannot be neutral in the values, ideas, and habits of mind it encourages. The classroom, as a key arena where children, teenagers, and adults develop intellectually, is a reflection of the teacher in multiple ways. English, history, and all social science teachers (to a lesser degree teachers of other disciplines) either help students gain a "sociological imagination" and intellectual depth by bringing the power differentials and injustices that define our unequal society into the center of the classroom, or they ignore all of the above, as though they were unimportant or incomprehensible to ordinary people. The classroom either encourages students to be reflective about their learning experience, value their own and their classmates' intellectual growth, and gain confidence as critical readers, writers, and thinkers, or it emphasizes completing the curriculum and acquiring prescribed knowledge or skill sets.

I chose to be the first kind of English teacher and much later discovered that there is a well-developed Marxist theory of education, "critical literacy," that describes my philosophy of teaching. It involves developing a curriculum that "challenges the status quo" in which the teacher consciously operates as an "agent[ ] inside a larger culture" (Ira Shor). It involves "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson and Irvine, 82). Critical Literacy "make[s] clear the connection between knowledge and power" (Aronowitz). Indeed, only knowledgeable people can understand how they are being exploited. Only knowledgeable people can see through the methods that the elite use to obscure the way they wield power. Knowledgeable people are not easily fooled by those with power; and, their knowledge can unlock the paths to attain it themselves

After almost forty years of teaching, mostly at the community college level, I feel sure that I have something valuable to share with other teachers, especially those who are just starting out. My greatest hope, as I embark on this project, is that it will find its way into the hands of teachers who are looking for a starting place as they develop their own pedagogical theory, practice and style.

My Philosophy of Teaching

I believe that real learning is transformative; it must be accompanied by internal change; assumptions must be challenged; perceptions of reality must grow or be altered in some way. If we can compare the human psyche ("the mental or psychological structure of a person" dictionary.com) to a tapestry, learning (as well as other formative life experiences) adds layers of color and texture that change the look and feel of that unique creation. Another analogy comes from Mao Tse Tung in his essay, "On Practice". "Whoever wants to know a thing has no way of doing so except by coming into contact with it, that is, by living (practicing) in its environment. ... If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality. If you want to know the taste of a pear, you must change the pear by eating it yourself...." In other words, a person must engage with and internalize reality (taste it, digest it) to really understand it. Transformative learning only occurs when students relate new ideas, perceptions, and insights to their own experience and thoughts. In this way, teaching and learning are intensely personal and emotional processes. For me, helping students grow and develop intellectually is a profound privilege and responsibility.

Like most frameworks, this philosophy is not original; it is embodied in the theory of critical literacy, constructivism, and the Highlander approach. It stands in opposition to the mainstream view of education as a process of helping students adapt and conform to an unjust society of winners and losers. It stands in opposition to the mainstream view that the learner is an "empty vessel" that the teacher "fills up" with new knowledge. One's purpose for teaching shapes the whole process and can profoundly influence our students' purpose for learning.

Students often come into class unconscious about their purpose for learning, but, nonetheless, it plays a role in how they approach it. Learning is either a ticket to individual advancement in a stratified society, a means of self-fulfillment (knowledge for its own sake), or, it is, ultimately, an opportunity to gain power and participate in changing the world (are there others?). Without ever being explicit, most educators and educational institutions in society promote the learning process in the first way,

as a ticket to individual advancement. This is consistent with the mainstream view that within a meritocracy, "education is the great equalizer". Students who work hard are rewarded with success.

The second way that students internalize the purpose of their education, as a means of self-fulfillment, is encouraged by some intellectuals, but generally dismissed by students and many other educators as starry-eyed and impractical in our competitive world. However, all educators who are committed to human development know the importance of students deriving meaning and purpose from learning. So, why is it that this second way of internalizing the purpose of one's education is so widely dismissed? I believe it is because the realities of social injustice, ever present in the lives of students, are typically ignored in the classroom. And, this social and political context is only ignored at the risk of sacrificing relevance and fulfillment for students who come out of oppressed populations, and many others who long for a more holistic (not compartmentalized) perspective on reality.

The third way students can define their purpose in learning embodies a social and political context. It is radical, in that it gets at the root of the contradictions within our society, as they relate to education. For example, studying in a community college liberal arts classroom should include an acknowledgement that students who come from working class neighborhoods do not have access to the same educational opportunities as students who live in privileged communities. Classrooms full of black and immigrant students are less likely to receive quality education than integrated or mainly white, American-born classes. The realities of race, gender, and class permeate every aspect of life. Equal education can't exist in a class society where the role of public schools is to channel students into an unequal economy. This third way of viewing one's purpose in learning, which I encourage in my teaching, places us all in the context of a capitalist society, built on the violence of slavery, class exploitation, and imperialist conquest. It invites students to discover how they fit into this complex reality, how it impacts their outer and inner lives, and what they could do to change society.

Philosophy is a set of truths that guide our practice. My philosophy of teaching is intertwined with my students' reason for being there. It guides me to create a classroom that invites my students, searching for something and full of the potential to make the world a better place, to grow in ways they could not have previously imagined.