Transparent Teaching: A Pedagogy for Success

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Many college English instructors are excellent teachers who have had little, if any, academic training in teaching. We know more about Harold Bloom than Bloom's Taxonomy, and we feel more comfortable discussing metanarrative than metacognition. We rightly agree that pedagogical theory, student teacher training, and teacher internship assessments are tasks of the schools of education at our universities.

Nonetheless, the title of our session today argues that all of us, as Texas college English teachers, play a role in preparing many of our college students to take their place as classroom teachers. Perhaps we are all conscious of this at some level, and most of us recognize the importance of English content knowledge as foundational for our students who will become teachers. However, our challenges as teachers of critical reading, text analysis, academic writing, literary theory, poetry, fiction, drama, film, technical writing, digital media, and so much more, keep us busy enough. So most of us teach English and leave overt pedagogical instruction to someone else. Nevertheless, many of us are aware, to some extent, that our everyday "teaching performance" does model pedagogy to our students. For many semesters this awareness alone has been my contribution to those future educators in my classes, and I was pleased by how well many of them had picked up on my teaching strategies and later reported to me how they had re-enacted them in their own English classrooms. Sarah, a high school teacher wrote:

> As a student teacher I found myself floundering when attempting to teach *The Great Gatsby*. I couldn't seem to get them to engage or connect with the text. I pulled out my old syllabus and notes for Dr.Kulesz's American literature course. Though she never

taught my class *The Great Gatsby*, I modeled my lesson after hers. My *Gatsby* lesson was my first perfect evaluation. My internship supervisor said he wouldn't change a thing.[1]

And Melissa, a tenth grade teacher wrote so glowingly that I knew my students were really paying attention to how I taught. She said: "I learned SO much from you, and I actually use several of the assignments you had us do in my own classroom (toned down for high schoolers of course..... I base a Sophomore Short Story Research Project off the major project that we did over a novel in your class.[2] "

Melissa and Sarah had been two of my very best students, and their in-class presentations were always engaging and innovative. They were already gifted teachers when they were undergraduate English majors. However, their notes from the trenches of teaching still seemed to offer proof to me that all the future teachers sitting in my classes would not only remember that the 19th century occurred during years beginning with the number 18, but that they would also take note of the active learning approaches I stressed in my courses and internalize them for the future. I felt confident that my students would graduate and join the ranks of new educators, just as confident and capable as Sarah and Melissa. Since I also knew that many of my students would eventually ask me to serve as a reference to hiring school districts, I decided that all of my upper level courses would have a group teaching project as part of the course requirements.

Part One: A good plan gone wrong, or isn't it obvious why we are here?

I envisioned the group presentation assignment as a way for students to practice teaching in a real classroom setting, allowing them to combine their abilities to interpret literary texts with engaging, learner-centered teaching. In the American Women Writers course, each group was

[1] I am grateful to Sarah Milosh, a former UT-Arlington student for allowing me to write about her and to quote her. She now teaches English at Bowie High School in the Arlington, Texas ISD,

[2] Thanks also to another UT-Arlington graduate for allowing me to quote her in this paper. Melissa Hall is now a secondary English teacher in the Mansfield, Texas ISD.

assigned a work of short fiction with the following requirements: teach the short story; provide a meaningful handout; employ some type of visual component; and utilize each member of the group equally during class period. I would evaluate these presentations and file a copy. Later, when asked to write recommendations for these prospective teachers, I would be able to refer to an actual teaching activity.

Imagine my disappointment when the teaching presentations began and group after group stood stiffly in front of the classroom reading plot summaries and author biographies for forty minutes. Their few attempts at active learning fell flat because they were either ill-conceived or were merely objective plot questions asked aloud to the class. It seemed that the Sarahs and Melissas of the world had obviously already graduated, because not one group did anything but bore us with details. I asked myself "Where had these students been all semester when I was engaged in modeling active, engaging pedagogy?" A quick review of the class attendance indicated that they had been sitting right in front of me. In fact, I remember them smiling, talking about texts, and working with their classmates. What they obviously had not done, however, was make any connection between my pedagogy and theirs. Korthagen notes in his 2001 work on teacher preparation that "what seems obvious to the teacher educator is not so to the student teacher . . . there is an unbridgeable gap between our words and the student's experiences" (22). For most of the students enrolled in my courses, *my* teaching didn't matter to *their* teaching. I tried not to think about the consequences of these students eventually standing in front of thirty ninth graders as they replicated these pedantic teaching presentations.

Part Two: Learning outcomes are not just for accreditation

If we are committed not only to teaching the subject of English, but also contributing to teacher preparation, we must first engage in acts of self-reflection. We must examine our own instruction at the most basic levels—the “what,” the “why,” and the “how” of our teaching.

At least two important issues arise for us to consider. First, do we as teachers know why we are doing what we do in our classes? In other words, are our learning outcomes for our courses, and for each day of teaching, clear to us as professors? Are we sure that we have developed pedagogical strategies designed to achieve these objectives? The Southern Association (SACS) requires that we state learning outcomes in our course syllabi. But I wonder how many of us use these as the authentic guide for teaching and learning in our courses? So, the first issue for me, when I began to think about this divide between my teaching and my students’ teaching presentations, forced me to consider my own teaching objectives and pedagogy.

The second important issue leads to the following questions, “Do our students know what is expected of them, and are they aware of how teacher practices connect to student learning outcomes?” Sometimes we are too coy in our teaching. In our efforts to promote student discovery, we expect them to make connections between theory and practice intuitively, or to take everything that occurs in the class—content, interpretative strategies, pedagogy, interaction—and to synthesize it all in sophisticated ways—just as we do. I realize I often expect them to be mind readers; I assume they will always know exactly where I am coming from and where I am going with a lesson or questioning strategy. But, many of them will not. Therefore, it is imperative that we become transparent teachers. We must communicate not only

what is to be learned, but explain our strategy for achieving learning goals. Basic learning theory in metacognition supports the notion of transparent teaching as important in student learning. When we talk about our pedagogy, we are letting students in on the secret of our teaching—the behind the scenes metacognitive processes we engage in as we prepare our classes. We should talk to our students about our own practices and ask them to understand how our pedagogy is designed to contribute to their learning. Not only will this practice encourage metacognition, and more effective learning, but it also has a significant impact in teacher preparation. When we directly explain our teaching practices, we engage in what John Loughran and Amanda Berry describe as "explicit modeling of practice" and what I call transparent teaching. Loughran and Berry assert that "explicit modeling is about us 'doing' in our practice that which we expect students to do in their teaching. This means we must model the use of engaging and innovative and teaching procedures…and offer student teachers access to the pedagogical reasoning, feelings, thoughts, and actions that accompany practice across a range of teaching experiences"(4). Our overt and purposeful commentary about our teaching strategies provides a window through which our students may view and understand how our college teaching practices allow us to address learning outcomes. Modeling solid pedagogy is only part of teacher preparation. We must direct our students' attention to the important connection between our practice and our purpose.

Part Three: How does my transparent teaching affect the future teachers in my classes?

If you remember Sarah and Melissa, the two students I mentioned earlier, you will recall that some of our students are already thinking of themselves as teachers, and during their time in our classes they are already absorbing pedagogical practices along with English content knowledge. However, most of our students see themselves as college students, not as future

teaching professionals. In addition to our own transparent teaching, we can also begin to focus their attention to the future by talking about their teaching in our classes and by designing assignments that allow them to visualize themselves as teachers, not just students.

Modeling is perhaps one of the most important aspects of teacher preparation; however, I learned from my disappointing teaching presentation assignment that modeling alone does not translate into our students internalizing effective pedagogy. Anderson and Ambruster do note that effective modeling may begin "with the observation of a master or expert who models the target skill"(5). For us this means teaching our subject: English. However, Anderson and Ambruster assert that transparent teaching is critical and suggest that. "By reflectively 'thinking aloud,' the expert may make explicit invisible mental processes that might otherwise remain mysterious to novices" (5). How can we do this without turning our English classes into education courses? I don't mean to oversimplify, but making modeling explicit is achieved quite easily by either providing a written explanation on assignments or by making a direct statement in class.

I will provide one illustration here using an assignment that accompanies an introduction to new historical approaches to analyzing texts, which is introduced to my students during our study of Harriet Jacobs's nineteenth-century narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. After we discuss some methodologies of new historicism, I assign a web quest to the class. Students work in pairs; each pair draws a slip of paper from a box on which I have written the four attributes of the 19th century "True Woman[3]:" *piety*, *purity*, *domesticity*, and *submissiveness* or the word *slavery*. The students are then assigned to research primary documents from the 19th century that connect with their particular terms. They might choose an ad from *Godey's Lady's*

[3] Historian Barbara Welter's well-known study cites four attributes valued for women by nineteenth-century culture. *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century.* Athens: Ohio UP, 1976.

Book, an article from a newspaper, a sermon, a poem, an illustration, a song lyric or other artifact. Then they are instructed to prepare two Power Point slides containing the primary artifact and an explanation of how that artifact demonstrates nineteenth-century attitudes about the true woman or slavery. During the next meeting students present their slides to the class and explain the relationships of their research to the text—particularly emphasizing how Jacobs worked within 19th century ideology in crafting her narrative.

The assignment is quite specific and structured. However, in order for the activity to be explicitly modeled, I must provide the rationale and intended learning outcomes. Thus, I offer students the following explanation:

> Here is why I am assigning this activity. First of all, it reinforces and clarifies approaches to new historical methodology. Second, it provides guided practice in primary research. Third, it either introduces you to effective Power Point use or provides you more practice. Fourth, it requires that you analyze and synthesize a critical method of reading, a literary text, and an artifact. Fifth, you also work with a peer on a short written critical analysis.

This list focuses students on the learning outcomes intended for them, but they need a bit more explanation to envision this activity as a pedagogical strategy they might someday use. Therefore I also tell them: "If you are going to teach, think about assignments that accomplish more than one teaching aim." Sometimes students will have a few questions about the assignment or about the pedagogy. But even with their questions, the explicit modeling of this assignment takes less than three minutes. I believe that explicit modeling will not only help us as educators critique our own practices and allow us to clarify and to create authentic, learning outcomes, but I also contend that explicit modeling provides reliable guidance for the future teachers in our classes.

Part Four: Beyond modeling: What else should we do?

Although I often shy away from using sports metaphors and analogies, I do recognize that individuals who coach sports are primarily teachers who make sure their athletes master fundamental skills, learn adaptable strategies, and demonstrate their abilities independently but with support and advice along the way. The legendary UCLA Basketball John Wooden is one of the most successful and revered figures in athletics. What many of his fans do not know is that he began his career as an English teacher, and one biographer notes that Coach Wooden's "approach to coaching very much mirrored the things he learned from years of teaching English" (Hill 97). Wooden's teaching principles are widely quoted on websites dedicated to coaching and teaching, and Andrew Hill sums them up in this way, "Coach broke down teaching into a set of four components: demonstration, imitation, correction, and repetition" (97). Others refer to these as Wooden's "Eight Step Theory of Learning" and list those steps as: "Demonstration, Imitation, Correction, Practice, Practice, Practice, Practice, Practice" (Quotes).

Regardless of which version one prefers, the notion of coaching is implicit in this model, and coaching always occurs along with repetition or practice. Anderson and Ambruster also identify coaching as one of the elements of effective teacher training and suggest that "coaching has the flavor of collaboration rather than evaluation"(5). They also propose that "students increasingly assume responsibility for coaching each other" (10). Effective coaching, along with opportunities to practice teaching, provide important lessons to our students that will affect their future classroom pedagogies.

Coached practice can occur in our English classes in a variety of ways, but "class presentation" or "teaching practice" assignments offer some of the most effective ways for

students to practice in front of a group, to coach one another, and for us to provide feedback on their teaching. The English 3370 (American Women Writers) teaching assignment (Sample A) has been developed to fulfill some of these aims. The assignment is posted on the course web page from the first day of the semester. I refer to it throughout the semester as I explicitly model or talk about my own teaching. I ask students to consider whether the approaches I use in class or adaptations of my approaches would be something they might use later in the semester in the group teaching presentation. I assign groups early in the semester and have these groups work collaboratively on other group assignments and tasks throughout the semester. Having these groups work together on other, smaller assignments, helps build teamwork, cooperation and trust that I hope will create an atmosphere where team members coach one another with compassion and confidence when they actually begin preparing their teaching presentations.

Because student-centered learning should always be a teaching goal for us and our future teachers, the assignment requires groups to employ active learning strategies. I no longer just expect students to do this because I do it. I have learned that I must not only talk about my own strategies and characterize them as active or passive, but I must also require students to develop and practice these teaching strategies. You will notice that the assignment has links to some active learning web sites, too.

The next example (Sample B) is the evaluation component for the 3370 presentations. Purposefully, the comments on the teaching aspect of the evaluation appear after the grade in order to seem more akin to coaching rather than criticism. Students in the class also complete evaluations for each group and must identify what worked and did not work in the actual teaching of the short stories. They must also suggest specific learning strategies that would help

them learn more effectively. Consequently, everyone in the class is thinking about teaching and learning, and ideally, we all collaborate to improve everyone's teaching.

Part Five: So does anyone get a grade? Or do we all just join hands and sing?

Yes, everyone gets a grade and the balance here is to comment on teaching in positive terms while seriously evaluating students for a grade. However, one of the most important aspects of the assessment is their own self-evaluation, and this is just one more of the components that Anderson and Ambruster suggest for preparing successful teachers. They note that "reflection and articulation are important processes. Both processes help students gain consciousness of and control over basic conceptual and procedural knowledge" (7). Therefore, I ask my students to comment on their own experience, to describe what they learned about the short story, and how they specifically participated in the entire project. In this reflection they are encouraged to ask questions about the strategies they used in the presentation, and then I respond to them in my final evaluation.

In another group presentation assignment[4] for English 3340 (History of American Literature) class, students receive two assessment summaries. One (Sample C) records my responses to several presentation components. Students receive this specific evaluation immediately following their presentations. Note that this page does not have a grade on it. When I speak to their teaching at this stage of the evaluation, I consciously shift from "grader" to "coach" and attempt to address teaching issues in specific and positive ways by suggesting alternate strategies or affirming what I have observed in class. For example, when students used photos taken by Eudora Welty when they taught "A Worn Path," but never commented on the photos, I wrote:

[4] See Sample D under "REQUIREMENTS" to read a summary of the 3340 group assignment.

> Most of the class members did not understand the connection between the photographs you showed and the short story. How could you make them understand this? Keep in mind your own purpose. Do you want students to see a thematic connection? Are these photos of the author? Did the author take these photos? If so, how can we "read" these photos along with the short story? Are you using the photos to show context or setting? Think about your purpose and then design three questions to ask the class about the photos. Or you might also think of a mock writing assignment built around the photos and the short story. By designing a writing assignment you will have to decide what you want your students to understand. This should help you bridge the gap between what you intended and what the students missed.

I believe these comments speak to their teaching, but also address their own interpretative strategies for the short story. Students must understand the short story and be aware of their methods of reading, but they also have to begin thinking about translating what they do as English majors into pedagogical strategies appropriate for their future students.

When I write the initial responses, I also have the evaluations of the class to use in my comments, and I refer to them in the "classroom teaching suggestions" section. At the bottom of this page, students are instructed to "reflect and articulate" by providing personal and group evaluations. After I review all group members' reflections, I then assign grades. Group and individual grades appear on a letter to each student (Sample D) where I remind them of the assignment components which serve as a guide for my evaluation.

By explaining why we do what we do, *and* noting how these approaches could work for our students in their own future classes, we demystify the teaching process for not only our students, but perhaps for ourselves. When we engage in successful, effective pedagogy, it does

not occur like magic. Therefore, many of our students need our help in visualizing how they can use our approaches in their own teaching. When we do not help them see the connection between our teaching and their own, it is almost as if we say, “Don’t try this on your own; professional teacher at work.” If we choose to take seriously the task of teacher preparation, we must invite our students to see themselves as teachers, too, and we must let them in on the secrets of good teaching.

SAMPLE A

English 3370 American Women Writers Short Fiction Group Presentations

Your group will be responsible for the presentation of an assigned short story. Your presentation may take whatever form you choose, but use approaches that will help the class understand the material and offer a demonstration of good teaching. You should assume that each class member has read the assignment. **Therefore, no summary of the story will be necessary.**

You should consider select criticism available for your particular short story during your preparation. It is not required that you use these materials in your presentation, but your presentation must be more than a superficial discussion of the text. The class members will not be able to read any extra materials; therefore the critical articles will serve to inform your pedagogical strategies. Autobiographical readings of the text are not the most scholarly and sophisticated approaches. Additionally, investigations of background/context should be worthwhile and have a clear connection to the short story. Do not suggest that history serves as merely a background for literature, nor that literature is merely a reflection of history. Think about how the text engages larger thematic issues; narrative strategies; setting; characterization; or other literary approaches. You want your lesson to be engaging, informative, and intellectual.

Your group should have a handout or visual component that is helpful, substantive and scholarly. If you use scholarly articles to assist your reading and discussion of the text, please list these on a handout. If you find other useful resource material that might be helpful to future teachers, list it also. All groups are required to implement ***active learning*** strategies into the lesson. Review teaching approaches used in this class and in other classes and choose those that will work best for what you are teaching. Keep in mind that you have **40 minutes** of teaching followed by a 10 minute question session.

Active Learning Links:
http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/active.htm
http://www.active-learning-site.com/
http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/

Each group member will be graded individually. Therefore, each person must participate in preparation and presentation. You will be evaluated on the following:

- Ability to communicate effectively in front of a large group
- Ability to work collaboratively with a small group
- Knowledge of and interpretation of text
- Presentation concept, preparation, and organization
- Handout and/or visual component
- Teaching Strategies

Each group member will complete a self-evaluation/reflection and a group evaluation. Class members will complete a written response for each group presentation; they will identify strengths and weakness and offer suggestions for improving the teaching component of the presentation.

SAMPLE B

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" Group Evaluation

Even without one of your members you all did a remarkable job. Good idea to begin with game. It tests knowledge and is good ice breaker. It is also active learning.

One observation that I have for all the groups: Remember that the story is the focus. Don't spend more time on things outside the text (biography, context, etc.) than you do on the actual text. Also, focus on learner-centered presentation. Use active learning strategies throughout the presentation.

Like the focused objectives. This provides a good road map for class to follow.
Cognitive maps are good, but refer to them so students will know how to utilize them.

Need a better literary definition of stream-of-consciousness. Since this is the major narrative strategy of this text, it probably warrants a clearer explanation and bit more focus.

K's article exemplifies New Critical approach. You all should start with this and then extend this to more current modes of reading. New Criticism serves to identify major parts, but does not answer the "so what." We use other methodologies to provide more substantive analysis.

Good use of Dickinson poetry to show the "conversation" here. You might introduce the notion of intertextuality. A very good presentation. I am impressed with the quality and how it demonstrates obvious dedication/preparation of the task.
Well done

Grade: A-

A word about teaching. . .
Good idea to begin with a game. It gets everyone's attention, and it also helps you (the teacher) evaluate knowledge of students. This helps you know where to begin with content. I am impressed with the focused learning objectives. This is something you should always keep in mind as a teacher, but even better idea to share them with your students. (Metacognition—thinking about learning and how one learns.) Objectives are like road maps for students to follow and check their progress. You did a good job letting them know what you wanted them to accomplish during the 50 minutes.
Cognitive maps can be good, but only if students know the purpose. Refer to them as you teach so students will know how to utilize them.
Focus on a learner-centered presentation. Use active learning strategies throughout the presentation. The parts of class where you engage the students were the most winning and effective.

SAMPLE C

New Historical Group: (List student names here.)

General Comments:

- Your power point was very detailed and clear.
- At beginning, some confusion in initial definition of N.H.
- The depth of your analysis was very good.
- Your handout gave students a guide to your presentation.
- Good use of text to demonstrate your points.
- Make sure your group members all know what the other members will say. Never just "show-up" with your information in a formal presentation. The concept is to convey your ideas as "one voice" so to speak.
- Final comments tended to be informed from a gender studies rather than New Historicists point of view. How can these work together??
- Game was good idea. However, it was implemented a bit haphazardly due to time constraints. The issue of time is a responsibility of each group member.
- Use of close reading strengthened your presentation!
- Good use of contrasting contextual quotes with quotes from novel.
- Good observation about uneasiness of modern scholars as they try to deal with Chopin.

Classroom teaching suggestions:

- You might consider how to make the lesson more interactive. Especially since the methodology you were assigned is so complex.
- Those of you who used a more conversational presentation style seemed to have a clearer grasp of your subject.
- Always try to give a specific example when you introduce a difficult concept.
- The French is difficult. Practice saying it aloud. Make sure all group members use same pronunciation.
- Consider using game to introduce the lesson. Perhaps it will heighten interest in topic. Why was game a basic factual recall exercise rather then being based on New Historicism?? You want active learning AND higher level thinking.
- All instructors should clearly identify their aims for the lesson before they begin deciding on the actual material to be covered or strategies they will use.

Follow up:

I would like each group member to send me an email evaluation of your own contribution to the group. Honestly categorize the time spent working on preparation for the class. Try to analyze the aspects of the assignment that you found most challenging. Did you learn something from this exercise? What, if anything? This should just be an informal note to me. Make sure you send your message to kulesz@uta.edu. Do not click "reply all" or everyone in your group will read your message!

Final Comments:

Overall this was a good presentation, although it may have lacked some continuity. Some members were obviously very knowledgeable and prepared. I think the methodology is difficult to teach, and you all did a fine job.

SAMPLE D

Dear 3340 Student,

I want to congratulate the class on the time, effort and enthusiasm that went into the preparation and presentation of *The Awakening*. I think we have all learned a great deal during this project. Thank you for your hard work!

The group grade is based on the ability of the group to follow the assignment guidelines and to effectively meet the requirements set out below.

Assignment: Your group will communicate your understanding of the assigned approach to the class during a group presentation. You challenge is to acquaint the class with the approach in clear, concise terms, without being overly-simplistic or reductive. This is a delicate balance because many of the approaches are not easily defined, and others are umbrella terms for a variety of critical gazes.

Requirements: (1) All group members must participate in preparation and presentation. (2) Each group should use some sort of visual component during the presentation. (3) Each group should prepare a handout for the class. (4) Each group must use the assigned approach to "read" Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and suggest to the class ways in which the critical approach informed your reading of the text. *Each group will have 40 minutes to present, followed by a question and comment session.*

Point deductions were taken for time issues, organization issues, and information/application shortcomings. I also consider class comments about your group. Overall the groups were very, very strong, although there may have been weak individuals in the groups. The individual grade, therefore, assesses the individual apart from the group. I consider the following in my evaluation of individuals: ease of presentation, knowledge of subject, obvious preparation, knowledge of other group member's portions, and the information from the self-evaluations.

There are three grades in *The Awakening* Project section. Your grades are as follows:

Group Presentation:

Individual Presentation:

Essay:

Project Average:

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