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ABSTRACT

Through specific practices in methods classes, prospective teachers can be taught the benefits of professional activism. One such strategy is to provide students with complimentary copies of "Language Arts" and ask them to read two or three articles that especially interest them. Another strategy asks students to read, select, and submit one or two articles from the "English Journal" that could be included in a class anthology of effective teaching practices. Still another assignment requires students to offer solutions/suggestions for problems raised in "Classroom Practices," a series published by the National Council of Teachers of English. A procedure that calls for considerable student involvement is the "mini-conference" in which students are asked to role-play published professionals, offering their ideas and strategies in conference-fashion to other members of the class. Writing assignments can call for the use of professional publications as models and stipulate a teacher audience for essays. Yet another strategy allows students to substitute conference attendance and participation for a major course assignment. By incorporating such practices in a methods course, students can learn to profit from professional studies and to practice a professional role. (HOD)

Nurturing Professionalism: Here's How

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Laura Jordan is a pro. With eleven years of teaching behind her, she has worked in two Georgia schools, first in an Atlanta high school, then in a suburban Douglas county middle school where she became English language arts chair two years ago. She is listened to both by her fellow teachers and by her building principal. In Hatfield Middle School, she has pressed, with some success, for a modified writing-across-the-curriculum program, for sanity in the interpretation of standardized test results, and for the elimination of writing as a punishment, a popular practice until recently--until, that is, Laura Jordan began making quiet good sense about its negative effects on middle-schoolers.

Laura Jordan has professional habits, professional instincts. An NCTE member for a decade (she missed 1977 for some reason), she reads Language Arts regularly and has made sure that it and English Journal are available in her school. She attended the 1980 Cincinatti convention (her brother lives nearby), though most national meetings seem too far away and too costly for her to participate. She is pleased that NCTE shifted to a pre-Thanksgiving convention calendar, and she has her eye on the Denver (1983) meeting. Active in GCTE, the Georgia affiliate, she is a regular at its annual conferences co-sponsored by the University of Georgia; she has planned and attended district and local meetings too numerous to remember. More comfortable in an audience than behind a dais, Laura rarely presents her own programs at these meeting, but--as a favor to a

friend who'd become an area supervisor--she did in fact offer a well-received workshop on the classroom use of three young adult novels at NCTE's Atlanta affiliate conference. Her paper on the same topic was quickly accepted for inclusion in an upcoming NCTE classroom-practices collection. She would like to write more, but isn't sure she has the time. Several half-outlined writing projects, included a short story manuscript, await her attention.

Laura Jordan is fictitious, or at least a composite pieced together out of numerous highly professional teachers I have known. She should seem familiar to most teacher educators.

Where do the Laura Jordans come from? Most colleges produce a few like her (by luck?), most English education faculty delight in teaching an occasional Laura-to-be (born, not made?), and most teacher education programs--rather vaguely, rather pretentiously--list curricular goals calling for professionalism. But our aspirations and good intentions too frequently fall short. Instead of a cadre of Laura Jordans, teachers who form the heart of good English instruction, our universities graduate too many dedicated non-joiners, non-EJ-readers, minimum-compliance teachers who enter the classroom half-informed and then backslide. Quickly, these teachers are out of touch with research, with enlightened teaching methods, with issues affecting them daily. Wherever Laura Jordan gets her inspiration, she stands out as an exception to the rule of professional apathy.

To be sure, some of our students--either pre- or in-service--are natural pros; they "have it" or "get it" no matter what we do or even in

spite of what we do. A similar number, still relatively few, will resist our best and brightest efforts to nurture professional habits. ("Real teachers don't do stuff like that," one told me not long ago while whining about a reading assignment in professional journals.) A substantial majority, though, lie somewhere in between; these teachers-to-be are those whom I have discovered can be taught the benefits of professional activism. Through specific practices in methods courses, described below, Columbus College is pushing or, perhaps, nudging the in-betweeners in Laura Jordan's direction. At the same time, program goals related to professionalism, variations on themes sounded in NCTE's "Statement on the Preparation of Teachers of English" (see English Education, Summer, 1976, pp. 195-210), have taken on greater meaning and are more frequently realized.

Here, then, are proven strategies designed to instill professionalism. Use of NCTE Publications. Assignment of readings from English Journal and other NCTE publications is commonplace, though professional habits are not prompted by such assignments alone. To get greatest long-term professional benefit from such readings, several related practices have proven useful: (1) For undergraduates, provide complimentary copies of Language Arts or other appropriate journals; then--without assigning specific articles--ask students to skim the full issue and to read two or three articles that especially interest them. Because this is how you and I read, selectively, your teachers-to-be should do likewise at least part of the time. Allow suitable time for open-ended discussion of readings in class,

and don't be concerned if the flow of talk wanders a bit. Professionals do this; students ought to as well.

(This, of course, is a ripe time in invite students to join NCTE at the special discount rate. I do not require membership, however, since forced professionalism is, in my view, a contradiction in terms.)

(2) Try the "Anthology Assignment," as follows: Assign two or three students each to the last several years of English Journal. Require each, working independently, to select and submit to the full class one or two articles that might be included in an anthology entitled Surviving the First Year in the English Classroom--Gracefully (different anthology titles would be used for different courses such as adolescent literature or composition methods). Ask students to xerox their choices and to prepare a brief written rationale as to why each would be apt reading for new English teachers. In class, form editorial groups to cull out duplications or, more simply, to select the best dozen or so articles. These may be organized along lines students prefer (for example, readings grouped according to planning, implementing, and evaluating; or the more familiar headings of language, literature, and composition). With a table of contents prepared for this original collection, your students will have a tangible product of their focused professional reading. The collection then may be bound in a ring notebook, circulated among class members, and used in future sections of the course.

(3) Organize a problems course around the selective use of NCTE's annual classroom-practices titles. A pivotal requirement in our M.Ed. program

is the course "Problems in Teaching English." For a time, the course might as well have been titled "Everything You Ought To Have Wanted to Know About Teaching English . . . ." In effect, it was a laundry list of cure-alls for what was wrong with much of English instruction. Given my degree of missionary zeal, the course wasn't all that bad, but it wasn't good enough.

For three years now, however, I have centered this course on four "problems"--four topics highlighted by the various classroom-practices collections published annually. Most recently, I used Responses to Sexism (1976-1977), Activating the Passive Student (1978-1979), How to Handle the Paper Load (1979-1980), and Structuring for Success in the English Classroom (1981-1982). These offered a nice mix of topics, concerns, and approaches. Next time I will drop Structuring for Success . . . (too much overlap with Activating) and Sexism (I hear it may go out of print) and add the 1982-1983 collection, which focuses on language differences and, perhaps, the Teaching the Basics--Really! (1977-1978).

Students, whose response is extremely positive, select two of the four titles (problems) for reading, papers, and other projects. Each, in turn, takes part in a "mini-conference," through which he or she shares readings with others in the class (see discussion on the mini-conference, following).

The results of this fluid approach to text selection are heavily positive. First, students are exposed to a wide range of professional literature--most of it highly practical and, thereby, "motivating";

second, through choosing among the four problems, students see, implicitly, that their professional concerns matter and to some extent at least, ought to lend shape to their graduate studies; finally, I am kept reasonably current through a recurring shift toward the latest trends in curriculum and teaching strategies. On the other hand, this approach is somewhat short on theory (I believe one may sneak it in the back door, so to speak), and, further, it is possible to overlook valuable topics not addressed in four anthologies. Such topics, I have learned, can be dealt with directly through class sessions where, by design, I and students deal with "other problems." On balance, the benefits of this rotating approach far outweigh the disadvantages.

The Mini-Conference. The mini-conference is a highly involving activity I use frequently. It might be more accurately described as a mock-conference, for in it students role-play published professionals offering their ideas and strategies, conference-fashion, to other members of the class. Through participation in a mini-conference, students learn that presenting ideas to fellow teachers and future teachers can be rewarding, that "giving a paper" need not be something that only "they" do, and that conference attendance can be a rich source of practical teaching approaches.

To set up a mini-conference, divide the class in half and assign each different readings, preferably collections of short articles on a common topic or problem. In a composition methods course, for example, one might pair Koch and Brazil's Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process (NCTE, 1978) and How to Handle the Paper Load (NCTE, 1979). In

a class of twenty, this means that ten students read each collection. Set a deadline for completing readings; on that day, set aside about an hour to divide the class into two planning groups, each charged with selecting articles for presenting, with assigning these articles to student volunteers, and with fleshing out a conference program with names, session titles, and times.

Early in the planning stage, some students will be puzzled. Normally, therefore, I provide a model mini-conference session, pretending to be Charlie Cooper or Sheila Schwartz or whoever. I explain that I have just arrived from San Diego or Long Island and that I'm very pleased at the chance to share my thoughts with them. A bit of mock seriousness usually goes over well. For ten to fifteen minutes, I make my presentation (attempts to sound like Charlie or Sheila are not recommended), supplying class members with a one-page handout summarizing my major points or illustrating an important technique or other detail. Then I call for questions, which take about another ten minutes. "See?" I explain. "There's nothing to it."

For the group planning sessions, appoint leaders and suggest that each group work through a few questions designed to assist in selecting articles for presentation: Which articles are "too good to miss"? Which seem impractical for this community? Which might be implemented without outside financial support from the system? Sometimes I supply such questions before students have begun reading. In a collection of twenty or more articles, half--typically--are scratched quickly, several stand out as musts, and others are identified to round out the program.

The session concludes with filling out a program planning form for a two-hour mini-conference. For each of three or four thirty-minute sessions, two or three presenters are scheduled simultaneously, in different rooms, thus requiring that class members will eventually select which session to attend. Those who will come to a session do so by choice. Each planning group then submits its form, from which will be prepared a final program listing the title of each session, the names of presenters (article authors), their institutions, and other information such as room numbers.

At the conclusion of the session, give each student a ditto master for making a conference handout.

Each mini-conference falls a week or more after planning, thus providing time for pulling together quality presentations. One class meeting beforehand, programs are circulated. These should be realistic and attractive, printed on colored paper, if available. A centered title ("How To Handle the Paper Load," a Professional Mini-Conference) also helps. Ideally, students will submit their ditto masters at the same time.

During the first mini-conference, your function is that of facilitator, making sure that programs are understood and followed, that handouts are available, that AV equipment, if needed, if on hand. Do not try to visit each session; your absence may have two valuable effects: (1) students understand that their presentations are not just for the professor, for a grade, and (2) presenters will look to one another, their colleagues, for realistic response and evaluation. To assist this

latter goal, be sure to have each session evaluated, with evaluation forms returned directly to presenters rather than passing through your hands.

The second mini-conference follows at another meeting of the class. Students who were conference goers switch parts and become presenters. Former presenters become conference goers and evaluators.

Several variations have proven either helpful or necessary with some mini-conferences. With one large class, multiple presentations were necessary (two speakers on related topics). On occasion, I have required students to play a second part, that of a so-called average student from the classroom of one of the presenters; role-playing students then offer testimonials from the perspective of young learners exposed to an innovative technique or curriculum offering. Invited outsiders, the more the merrier, have added a stronger sense of reality to some mini-conferences.

Design of Writing Assignments: Models and Audiences. A teacher educator's approach to writing assignments for pre- and in-service teachers can contribute markedly to developing professionalism. Two rather simple strategies are featured in English education courses at Columbus College: first, the use of professional publications as models; and, second, the stipulation of a teacher audience for essays and other papers.

In our adolescent literature course, for example, students have used short articles from "A Novel (Poem, Story, Essay) To Teach" (English Journal, January, 1976, pp. 53-75) as models for their own papers, thus

completing what we call an I-Recommend assignment. The better examples of these papers, once submitted, became the basis for articles in the Georgia English Counselor. More recently, clip-and-file reviews from The ALAN Review have provided the model for a similar course assignment. These short reviews, reduced onto-three-by-five cards, are an excellent exercise in concise expression. When printed up in quantities sufficient for each student to have a set, clip-and-file reviews are an intrinsically motivating assignment with a built-in reward.

As with assignments for younger learners, a clear conception of audience should be built in to course papers. An audience other than the instructor is often desirable. More often than not, I ask students to "imagine a reader rather like yourself, a English teacher interested in some new approaches or concerned about a particular learning problem." Given this much reality, even hypothetical, English education students write with a good deal more vitality than they do when all papers are directed to me. Shared in class, these papers reveal the ability of pre- and in-service teachers to offer valid professional insights through their writing. Papers of this sort, further, lead easily toward professional publication; with minimal editing, 1982 course papers by Jim Argroves (Upson County High, Georgia) and Mindy Sparrow (Phenix City Central High, Alabama) have been readied for publication in an upcoming issue of the Georgia English Counselor.

Credit For Conference Attendance. This strategy, the essence of which is that students may substitute conference attendance and participation for a major course assignment, has been extremely successful in promoting

professional participation. For several years, I encouraged students to take advantage of state-level and/or university-sponsored English and language arts conferences. Falling during an academic term, these events frequently required my presence as a speaker or NCTE affiliate officer. Typically, between three and six students elected to attend with me, a disappointing showing even when professional events were as close as fifty miles.

Three summers ago, in contrast, I built conference attendance into the overall course structure as a optional way to meet requirements. Rather than write paper X or design unit Y, students might arrange to attend a Georgia Council of Teachers of English and University of Georgia-sponsored summer conference in Athens. Immediately, the prospect of conference attendance became more attractive to students. Eighteen of twenty-five students in one graduate section decided to go. By Summer Quarter 1982, more than thirty Columbus College representatives, several of whom were attending their third consecutive conference, made the almost two-hundred miles trip to Athens and the GCTE-UGA conference. Three were my co-presenters, students who had been inspired to offer a workshop on activity packets for use with young adult novels.

Doubtless, students gaining credit for conference attendance sidestep some valuable learning offered by more conventional assignments. But they gain a good deal more. A well-planned professional conference offers national and regional authorities, top-flight presentations by classroom teachers, and--always of special interest--exhibits of commercial materials and NCTE publications. As well, the element of choice

provides individualization; rather than be locked into one professor's notions of important topics and issues, the student-as-conferee picks and chooses from sessions ranging from dialect to drama to gifted students as writers. The result: a closer mesh between felt professional needs and learning experiences, not unlike the best open classrooms of the early seventies.

The greatest benefit of conference attendance for students is an intangible, however, one derived from the experience of getting away from campus routines for one or two nights, socializing with other teachers or teachers-to-be, and immersing one's self in his or her profession for a concentrated short time. Rather like the departmental retreat, such events build group feeling and recharge a teacher's batteries. I have found that students return to class with substantially stronger levels of interest, with a heightened willingness to participate in discussions, with an appetite for all their regular professor and course have to offer. This effect derives from the composite experience, the gestalt, of participation in a professional conference.

To summarize, the planned teaching of professionalism can pay off. Columbus College has seen its graduates become knowledgeable curriculum workers and informed department heads. Some, of course, would have ended up playing such roles well anyway. There are always one or two Laura Jordans who remind the rest of the profession what it's all about. But others, the in-betweeners, profit from studies which promote their use of professional literature, allow them to practice professional roles in speaking and writing and develop their interests in teacher conferences. Teaching toward professionalism can be a reality when brought down to earth and made tangible.